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THE PATHWAY OF THE PIONEER

(NOUS AUTRES)

BY

DOLF WYLLARDE

AUTHOR OF "THE UNOFFICIAL HONEYMOON"

THIRTEENTH EDITION

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DEDICATION

To those high hearts that could not fear,—
  To those weak hands that could not fail,—
  To feéble feet that dared assail
The pathway of the pioneer;—

To those whom men cast off, passed by,—
  (Yet used for vantage, as they could,
  Their handicap of womanhood!)—
Who, dying, only could not die;—

Through the ordeal of blood they passed—
  And came back without faith in God.
  The outcast's outcast path they trod . . .
And fought their way to Him at last.

Beneath a victor's diadem
  Their Ghosts may see a race begin
  Who shall not fail;—and say "They win—
WE OTHERS showed the way to them!"

"THE multitude of victims has not robbed us of courage in the past, nor will it rob us in the future,—till victory dawns. . . . You—who survive—will conquer, and in your victory, we, the dead, shall live. . . .

"TAKE NO THOUGHT FOR US; THE BLOOD OF THE FORERUNNERS IS LIKE THE SEED WHICH THE WISE HUSBANDMAN SCATTERS ON THE FERTILE GROUND. . . .

"Work! There is no obstacle that cannot be overcome, no opposition that cannot be destroyed. The how and the when only, remain to be solved. You, more fortunate than we, will find the clue to the riddle, when all things are accomplished, and the times are ripe. . . .

"Hope! . . . hope always! and waste no time in weeping."

From Mrs. Humphry Ward's "Lady Rose's Daughter," chap. xxi. p. 358.

THE PATHWAY OF THE PIONEER

(NOUS AUTRES)

CHAPTER I

"We have done with Hope and Honour, we are lost to Love and Truth,
We are slipping down the ladder rung by rung;
And the measure of our torment is the measure of our youth,—
God help us! for we knew the worst too young."

RUDYARD KIPLING.

FLAIR CHALDECOTT turned on the gas, and pushed the chairs into position. Then she let down the blind and shut out the roaring March evening and the brown twilight. The night seemed full of wind and fluttering leaves even in this little side street where trees were not; the women's skirts flapped as they passed, and the men had to hold on their hats. Passers-by were few, but those who came in sight battled with the wind, and said in dumb show that it was well to be indoors.

It was cold in the bare room, as well as in the streets, even though a large stove had been burning for an hour. The gas-lamp would help, so Flair turned it up full, and it revealed every detail of the unusual furnishing, searching into distant corners and displaying three large packing-cases with straw protruding through the spaces between the boards, as if some one were perpetually

moving house. Besides the packing-cases there were seven chairs of no resemblance at all to each other, which appeared to have been forcibly gathered together rather than naturally associated. There was also a bare deal table on which lay a large dictionary and some typewritten sheets—the fifth chapter of Flair's last story which she was correcting while waiting for the assembling of Nous Autres, for she could not afford to waste time. A rug had been laid on the oil-clothed floor, before the half-circle of the seven chairs, and on one of the forlorn packing-cases was an old drawing-board, converting it into a sideboard to carry a syphon of soda-water, a bottle of cheap claret, and half a bottle of whisky. There were cigarettes and matches on the mantelshelf. This completed the furnishing.

The room had two doors to it, one leading into a long passage and thence to the entrance of the house, the other to a small dressing-room, where, every time that the society met, Flair carried her own lamp, and hung up a square of looking-glass. She also provided a towel, soap, and a brush and comb from her own bedroom, which was up six flights of stairs at the top of the gaunt, echoing building, and when the meeting was over, and she was tired and wanted to get into bed, she had most of these things to convey up the six flights again, which necessitated two, if not three journeys before she could do so, it being a stipulation to her use of the empty room with the packing-cases that she should leave it as she found it.

The door which led into the passage had a strip of cardboard some two feet wide hanging from a nail on the inner side, and black-lettered like a label, "NOUS AUTRES." This also Flair removed after each irregular meeting of the society to which she belonged by election of circum-

stances, which is the only ballot known to Nous Autres.

There was an air of watchfulness and expectancy about the girl as she stood reading the typed sheets by the table, which seemed habitual to her, but none the less wearying. It was as if she set a dreadful guard upon herself that could not be laid aside even when she slept, for fear of being taken unawares in a dream. Once she raised her head from the sheet as she turned it, and looked down the long room as a sentry might look up and down his beat, and her eyes were haunted by a shadow of some threatened fear in their momentary expression. But it was only when she was alone that the expectancy took possession of the young face; at a sound of approaching voices and steps it had vanished, and Flair turned to meet her friends, who had never seen the former look, nor knew of its existence.

The door with the label opened almost before some one tapped, to admit first an exclamation, and then two girls.

"There ye are, dear! We're just clemmed!—there's plenty wind to-night. Ugh! I'm so blown about, I'm just a tatty-bogle!"

Through the high, sweet voice ran an accompaniment of merriment—not a full laugh, only the soul of it—and the speaker stooped and offered Flair a cold cheek as soft and pink as the heart of a wild rose. Something of the wild rose was in her slender, swaying figure, too—a most un-British grace, a haunting memory of France and the carriage of her women. Yet the voice came from the North Country.

"An east wind, is it?" said Flair. "That accounts for my skin playing me tricks. It feels like a nutmeg-grater! Where did you meet Alma?"

"On the doorstep, using the most awful swear

words, dear! Mrs. Bonnet let us in; she joined us on the doorstep, too, with plenty parcels. Oh, it was a kind of 'At Home' on the doorstep; and Alma was so cross with the wind, I could do nothing but laugh!" The voice trailed off into its irresistible, provoking merriment, and the hearers laughed too, because Winnie Dare carried the spirit of mirth with her wherever she came. She had laughed through hunger, and despair, and illness; and whenever Fortune did not hit her heavily at the moment, she staked her buoyant vitality with the born instinct of the gambler. To-morrow she would suffer again, for to-day she found something to laugh at, though half pitifully.

"I do hate wind!" said the smaller girl who had entered with her, loosening a fine wool wrap that had been twisted round her neck and over her mouth. Flair took it from her gently and laid her face a shade more tenderly against the one revealed.

"How's the cough, Alma?" she said.

"Better. I must be well by next week. We sing for 'The Merry Milkmaid' to-morrow, and, if I get in, we rehearse at once. May I go and take my hat off and clean up, Flair? I'm so dirty."

"Yes, of course. Where have you come from, then? Haven't you been home for a meal?"

"I borrowed a cup of tea with Hilda," said Alma simply, crossing the long space to the dressing-room at Winnie's heels. As they went they passed the packing-case and its refreshments.

"Have a drink?" said Flair hospitably.

Alma laughed and declined: Winnie laughed and accepted. She lingered to mix herself a small portion of whisky and soda, Flair looking on with comprehension.

"Have you had *any* meals to-day, Winnie?" she said, in a slightly desperate tone.

The rose-hued face turned to her brightly, the hazel-grey eyes smiled with love. For the minute Winnie Dare was at her prettiest.

"I lunched out, dear," she said with a little nod, and in a lower tone.

"Oh!" said Flair, accepting the confidence and attempting no comment. Winnie did not lunch alone, then. Well . . .! But if it had not happened she might not have lunched at all.

"Did he turn up at the office?" she asked, because it is not good to drop a confidence amongst Nous Autres, be it never so slight. There might come a day when there was no information offered, and that, in Flair's experience, preceded disaster. She never upbraided, and she never washed her hands of the responsibility and said, "Don't tell me, then." She listened It was the only help she could offer to all her friends alike.

"He sent up a message—I don't know what Mr. Jennings thinks—and I joined him outside." Winnie laughed again. Life often amused her, even when she was staking it most recklessly.

"How is the Jennings man?"

"Far too civil. He is a beast!"

"Most employers are," said Flair out of the ugliness of her experience. "Did he kiss his hand to you this time—when you left to lunch with Somebody?"

"No, the second clerk was in the office. I wonder what these firms engage a typist for?—to add a little excitement to the manager's business day, I sometimes think. The Jennings man told me I had a lovely figure yesterday, and *I* told *him* I should be glad if he would go away and not interrupt my work. I am getting positively rude to him, though he is my employer, and I don't see how to alter it."

"It would be a nuisance if you had to leave."

"I can't, dear—I simply daren't. When should I get anything else? And Somebody is getting so jealous, he threatens to come up to the office and speak to Jennings for me. There will be plenty rows, dear. What am I to do with them?"

"H'm!" said Flair drily. "I'll think. . . . Hurry up, Winnie! There's the door bell. It's Franc, most likely."

But as the last frill of Winnie's skirt vanished into the further room, the door was pushed open to admit a guest of the society who, though always welcome, was not one of them, being a very large, very handsome cat. He was what is technically called a "black-tabby," the ground-work of his coat being black, with grey markings, like watered silk, which hardly showed in some lights. He was not at any time a black cat, however, his singularly broad nose being distinctly brown, and the "bracelets" round his neck standing out against lighter fur.

He entered with the air of a man with his hands in his pockets, lounged across the room, paused at the table, and, after measuring the space as cats do, sprang with perfect aim and balance on to Flair's manuscript. She did not attempt a protest, but she did make a hurried note of thanksgiving that the streets were dry, because most of her MS. bore the cat's sign manual in four toe smudges when he had been out walking on a muddy day and came straight into her domains. He was originally the property of Mrs. Bonnet, Flair's landlady, who tolerated him because he never mewed, except in dire necessity, and did not desire to be nursed. When Flair drifted into the two small rooms at the top of the house, the cat made her acquaintance, and when Mrs. Bonnet cooked her a chop, she secretly

kept him the tail. Flair was strictly honest. Had she been examined over the subject, she would have said that he was her landlady's cat; but in the tenderness of her heart she knew that they would share their last scraps together—and it sometimes came to counting the pence. Nous Autres knew it too, and acknowledged him. He attended all their meetings, and by now wore a collar on whose plate was engraved his name and address.

"My sakes, miss! " said Mrs. Bonnet, "you don't suppose as anybody would want to *steal* 'im? Why, the neighbour'ood's so full of cats the trouble is *not* to 'ave one. No one's likely to want another."

Flair dodged the question, feeling herself weak. Nevertheless, the cat wore his collar and gained the respect of the street in consequence. His name would have astonished a finder had he really strayed, and they had seen it, for Flair had not had her own or Mrs. Bonnet's engraved above the address: the cat's own title was plainly to be read—though, it must be owned, between inverted commas.

His name was "R. L. Stevenson."

Flair had christened him for the pleasure of daily addressing a household deity, and as he had never had another he accepted it without question. Nous Autres called him "R. L." for short. He had flourished on the tails of Flair's chops, and having had some original beauty to develop, warranted in some sort the fear in Flair's mind that had resulted in his wearing a collar. As he sat upon the manuscript, with his solemn face and wonderful eyes turned on Flair, he looked like a monument of tabby fur; but he was undeniably handsome. The relations between them were obvious from the way in which he thrust his blunt nose into her hand as she stood beside

him, and rubbed a wet muzzle softly on her palm.

"Pretty old kitten!" said Flair softly, and with foolish flattery, for the enormous tom would have made six kittens.

By the time that Winnie and Alma had done gossiping and "cleaning up," the remainder of the society had arrived, and proceeded to assemble, one girl after another filing out to take off her hat, and returning to drop into the chair which was her own by custom. They represented, pretty collectively, the professions open to women of no deliberate training, some education, and too much delicacy for the fight before them. Hilda Romaine, of the Ladies' Catgut Band, may stand for music (she played in a very successful feminine orchestra at halls and amateur entertainments, whereby the conductor began a successful career, and the members usually starved, if they did not marry); Franc Peyton was of His Majesty's Telegraph Extension Department in His Majesty's Post Office (a Government official, please, on twenty-eight shillings a week, working eight hours a day, and half the night at exams if she wanted more salary); Magda Burke was art editor and journalist, with the chance of dismissal at the proprietor's pleasure at a week's notice (we give no characters in journalism. Dismissal spells failure, but the causes will not bear recording, because they usually reflect on those in authority, not on those employed); Alma Creagh, actress, with seven years' experience behind her, and glad to take thirty shillings a week and walk on (she had no influence and no figure. She played old women and boys as an artist, but the stage wants legs and private means); Beatrice Varley, music teacher and preparatory mistress in a second-rate private school, because her qualifications

were not quite sufficient for a high school. (Beatrice held two medals for music, and had taken scholarships; but after a struggle through her "Matric," she had never had either money, health, or time for the "Inter," which she might have passed more easily, and that barred the letters to her name. Her gifts were unluckily social, which are no good in the labour market.) Winnifred Dare, typist and shorthand clerk in a situation found for her by the firm which had taught her, and which, if she refused or threw it up, would find her no more (the less said about the situation the better, as witness the gentleman who kissed his hand to her and admired her figure); and Flair Chaldecott, fictionist, free-lance journalist, reporter, literary hack of all kinds who lived on whatever work she could get, and had neither illusions nor ideals left from eight years of honest work. They were all—Heaven help them!—the daughters of professional men, who, with the lack of responsibility peculiar to their generation, had had families for whom they had not the least intention to provide. Then they had partially failed—sometimes utterly—and died, leaving their daughters an inheritance of refinement that was nothing but a handicap. For the professions entail a certain amount of education and money, and these, again, presuppose means that rank the holders among the upper middle-classes—families whose women at least have been trained in a degree of idleness, of sheltered home life, of all the instincts and tastes that belong to the leisured classes. Then comes a new order of things that forces the new generation to stand on its own feet, and the girl who inherits her father's and mother's qualities finds herself suddenly thrust on to the lower plane of the workman's daughter, to compete with a coarser physique, a less sensitive mind, and more

capable qualities, for the labour that both must gain, or starve. The workman's daughter is coming up to meet the professional man's daughter coming down; they meet on a mid-level, and the one brings push to match the other's brains. The more refined animal is at a disadvantage, because she has lost her own sphere and does not take kindly to the lower; she is neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring. Then she becomes one of Nous Autres, who are the outsiders of life; and, like all pioneers, is lost without record for the good of a future of which she knows nothing, and which—being a woman—it is no comfort to her to contemplate.

Have you ever seen in the hansom cabs of London some poor, sorry hack which looks as if it were only held up by the shafts to get through its daily work, yet which, compared with the stronger, clumsier roadster trotting sluggishly by, still shows signs of breeding? The cabmen usually prefer an old, broken-down hunter, or a half-breed with some blood in him, however worn out, to the nearer relations of the cart-horse, for they have still the mouth that can feel a bit, and the instinctive pride that seems to make them willing to go until the patient hearts mercifully break—and there is another loss for the cab-owner. Nous Autres are very like the broken-down hunter. They cannot quite forget the gentle breeding, and they pull at the collar until they drop and die in the open road, stumbling the last half-mile, perhaps, but going game to the last.

There was plenty of diversity in the seven faces gathered in a broken circle in the long, bare room, but there was not much beauty The life they had led for some years had worn it away, and left the eager, fighting look of young men who have their own way to make in the world. Those who might have been the ordinary pretty

girl of the upper middle-class had lost their attributes of round curves and colour and bright expressions—something also of that intangible feminine quality which expects attention from the world at large merely because it is feminine. The anxiety about bread and butter soon destroys that look. Nous Autres learn that they are not likely to be spoiled by the men who look upon them simply as rivals, most fortunately handicapped by sex, but certainly not rendered more attractive by it. And if such consideration is offered them, it is a danger signal rather than a gracious tribute. The day of chivalry is over, and its outward courtesies are only put to an ignoble use for a motive too ugly to be acknowledged. When Magda met with indulgence, or Alma was treated with humanity, both girls had learned to be on their guard for a compensating demand on their personal attractions. It gave all the young faces a shadow of suspicion—a certain alertness that was apt to harden into defence before a man's eyes. It takes very emphatic beauty to survive the experience of such a training.

Hilda Romaine was the only girl amongst them who could be always called pretty, in spite of fatigue and ill-health and disheartenment; but Hilda would have been exceptional in any sphere of life. She belonged to no race and no climate, though she had often passed for "typically English" with mistaken critics. If you look in the British Museum amongst the antique sculpture, you will find many nameless women's heads with Hilda's profile, save that their lips are too coarse. But the lovely line of forehead and nose and cheek that is called Greek was exactly reproduced in her, and the generous width between the eyes, and the grand brows. She had, too, a curious droop of the head from the neck which threw her head into the loveliest pose, though she did

not stoop at all, nor was she bent by desk work like Magda or Flair or Franc. To the fined-down Greek features she had the added beauty of colouring—her hair was the true golden-brown that shines like the glossy coat of a thoroughbred horse; her skin was still a "complexion" in spite of the London air, and her eyes were very blue—even across a room they kept their colour. Magda, whose hair was the fair brown of many northern races, whose face was usually pale, and her eyes only blue when she was happy and grey when she was sad, was far more typically English. The hesitating colours of its skies and sunshine seemed to be reflected in her delicacy, but Hilda was as warmly painted as if she hailed from the tropics.

The talk to-night was desultory, because most of the girls were tired. Franc and Hilda were not smoking—not because they could not, but because they did not particularly care for it; the rest of the society were doing their best to thicken the atmosphere and make R. L. cough. He turned his broad back on them presently in deep disapproval, and went to sleep on Flair's story, regardless of blandishments. It was penal to talk shop, but Flair nearly earned a forfeit by turning to Winnie instinctively.

"They are knocking your market to bits in the *Athenæum*," she said.

"I know," said Winnie disgustedly. "Eightpence per thou., isn't it? No one could possibly live, dear. How can they expect decent work?"

"Well, if I do have to put out, I never expect anything but the regular rates. I wouldn't trust the lower wage," said Flair thoughtfully. It was a subject that interested both of them, Winnie as Labour and Flair as Capital, when, as she said, she had to put work out.

"Order! Order!" Franc called across the group. "Flair what are you thinking about?"

"Sorry," said Flair penitently. "I forgot. What's the last from the City, Franc?"

"Listen. This is what I heard at lunch to-day. A little boy went to have his tooth out, and he asked the dentist to give it to him afterwards, because it had been so painful when in his head. 'Well, my little man,' said the dentist, 'I should think you wouldn't want to keep it on that very account. What will you do with it?' 'Oh, please, sir, I shall wash it very carefully and take it down to tea, and put it on a plate and cover it with cake and jam, and watch it ache!'"

She ended with a chuckle of intense joy, and Hilda followed her lead with the swift, sarcastic ripple that chimed against Winnie's mirth. It did not take more to amuse them than it does other girls.

"Have you, any of you, ever seen Flair's dentist?" said Magda with intentional malice. "She told me he was good-looking, and took me a long journey out to Bayswater to see him the last time she had her teeth looked over. I felt inclined to demand my omnibus fare back from her! He was the most cadaverous-looking person you ever saw. Well, *there*!—I said, 'Where is the handsome man?'"

"I am beginning to know Magda's ideal," drawled Flair in retort, clasping her hands behind her curly head. "He is the sort of man who wants to make love to you immediately after breakfast, and tells you to put your hair back from your forehead!"

"How dare you!" Magda said, laughing. "I should like to see any man interfere with my personal appearance!"

"An Earls Court Exhibition kind of man," went on Flair dreamily. "He will take her out there in the evenings, for her sins, and then grumble at the crowd."

"Anyhow, that doesn't affect his looks; and he shan't be like a hungry bone, anyway!" (Magda was still indignantly reminiscent of the handsome dentist.)

"Oh, his looks won't matter! You will be far too much in love with his brutality!"

"I can't bear being made love to in the morning," said Alma, with great candour. "I want gaslights and surroundings and things."

"I shouldn't care for a man who only made love because the atmosphere intoxicated him," protested Hilda. "I should always doubt its reality—the next morning."

"That is just what Flair and I mean, though, —we don't want him bothering round the next morning! We are tired and practical until the lamps are lit."

"But that is because we are Nous Autres," Beatrice suggested, her voice floating out of her dusky corner like a song. When Beatrice spoke, people were first conscious of her personality, but she had a way of keeping long silences. "I don't fancy that the Real Girls have the same morning reaction that is forced on us."

"I'm too old to alter now," said Flair. "Magda must risk her inartistic young man if she will—only don't bring him round to me to be congratulated before four p.m., Magda."

The cushion which Magda aimed at her missed its mark and hit Beatrice, who had risen inoffensively to help herself to claret and soda. It is but fair to Nous Autres to say here that they did not drink wine in the ordinary sense of the word. Flair Chaldecott, after endless ailments, drove her distracted doctor into ordering it if she could possibly afford it. She was a delicate girl, with a poor circulation which was at the root of other growing weaknesses, and he had to contend with the germs of half a dozen diseases inherited from

an ancestry of which he knew nothing. So Flair went without any etceteras to her meals, and bought a horrible kind of wine at a shilling a bottle, which, eked out, cost her no more than if she drank beer, and injured her digestion even more. She called it claret, and Nous Autres contributed a certain amount of pence to supply the same stuff at their irregular meetings. Beatrice, when the cushion hit her, tucked it under her arm with an inscrutable smile, and continued her progress to the packing-case sideboard. Then she carried both tumbler and cushion back to her chair and made herself comfortable. She was a very slight girl, with too much dark hair for her white face, and gloomy eyes out of which a very hungry soul stared at a world which had fed it as sparingly as her thin young body. Beatrice was the youngest of the party, but she had been keeping herself by the drudgery of uncongenial teaching ever since a charitable institution turned her out with the stereotyped education it bestows on the daughters of men who have shirked all responsibility with regard to them by dying.

"Well, I do like that!" said Magda, with mock indignation. "Beatrice has taken the cushion which ought to be extinguishing Flair at this very moment."

"*Telum imbelle sine ictu!*" said Flair. "Which, freely translated, means that you're a beastly bad shot, Magda! Go on, Trix, tell us some more about the Real Girls. Don't they ever have reactions?"

"Of course not, because they have the right to be happy!" How softly ironical a young voice can be! The gas was over Beatrice's head, and threw strange shadows of her heavy hair about the childish roundness of her face. If she had not been so horribly young, it might have sounded tolerable. "We have lost it, you know;

if we are happy, *Nous Autres*, you may be certain we have stolen it, snatched at something we want."

"Yes," said Alma thoughtfully, taking a fresh cigarette, "it's always stolen; that's true. And you go into a corner and play with it under the rose! We've both been happy in that way, haven't we, Winnie?"

"Yes, dear—and enjoyed it like all stolen violets."

"I don't care for a thing I can't parade in broad daylight," said Hilda quickly. "It isn't happiness—it's excitement and distraction. I want something of my own that no one in the world dare question."

"But we must have some distraction," protested Magda. "No human being can live as Flair tries to do, and make the work everything. Flair writes verse and the kind of tale she loves and that she can't sell, when she wants a rest from pot-boiling. It can't go on; it's like feeding a dog with his own tail!"

"Say a cat, and I won't quarrel with you," said Flair lazily. "The vet. told me R. L. could live on himself for a fortnight, he is so well nourished."

"Well, you can't do it for long; I know you will break down. You had much better go to Earls Court with the young man you designed for me. He would probably be a decent fellow, and it wouldn't matter any more than if you went with another girl."

"If we take our distractions openly," said Franc honestly, "it means that we must accept as escort the men who are round about us—the class with which our daily life brings us in contact. What is the use of flinching from a grade that we consider in our hearts is just below us? The men whom Winnie calls 'not quite,' are our

social equals through stress of circumstances. It is no good fretting after a class which belongs to the Real Girls."

"Are you cold, Beatrice?" Hilda said kindly, for the youngest member of the party had shivered.

"Not physically," said Beatrice briefly. "Winnie shivered too—I felt it all across the room. And Flair set her teeth. You are quite right, Franc; we are all more or less on the level of shopgirls, and should be content to walk out with shopboys. If we insist on knowing gentlemen, we must do so illegitimately, and then they will treat us like shopgirls all the same."

"Look at Hilda!" said Flair, laughing. "Her fighting blood is up at the notion. Tell us your view of the Real Girls and their advantages, Hilda."

"The Real Girls," said Hilda, with a little resentful laugh, "have time to be dainty. If there is one thing I resent on Fate, it is the hurry it costs to earn one's bread and butter. I could turn myself out so well if I might live a little slower."

"Anyhow, you never look anything but lovely, Apollo." (Hilda's profile had gained her the nickname of the Apollo Belvedere amongst Nous Autres.) "So perhaps it is as well for the peace of mankind that you have not time to enhance your charms. I wonder whether the Real Girls have ever had to spoil their hands for lack of attention? It takes five to ten minutes to get them really clean in London after a morning's work. And we are mostly allowed half an hour for feeding time, washing being included."

"I should like to have my clothes mended for me, like a man," said Franc. "No affectionate landlady comes to *us* and offers to sew the buttons on our shirts. When we have ended our made

Acc. No: 106

day in the office, we have to go home and begin our female day—unless we have lost our sense of feminine decency and go in rags. I should be thankful to read in the evenings and forget myself and my own life for a while (though I don't hanker after extra work, like Flair), but there are always a pile of domestic duties that have grown during the day."

"You are a saint, Franc. But it is not all of us who have a home life at all."

"We have to cook our own dinner, though, even if we live in rooms," put in Magda ruefully. "Oh, how sick I get of it! I should often go without food at the end of a day if it were not for Deb. It is bad for her, and so I have to insist on supper. Why is it that these things are not done for us. Can you fancy a man living in rooms and cooking his own meals?"

"Some of them do; some of them go to eating-houses where we could not swallow the food. I suppose it costs too much to make an arrangement with your landlady to 'do' for you generally?"

"We went into that when Deb and I joined forces, and the other way is cheaper. No, we cannot afford to be comfortable, Nous Autres! The men are always better off than we, somehow. They don't mend their own table linen and clean their own plate, for another thing."

"I don't fancy they have such things," said Hilda honestly. "If a man lives in rooms and by himself, he does away with all such graces of life, unless he is rich. It's a bald existence, and one we will not endure ourselves. So as we will have the home luxuries and refinements after which we hanker, we pay for it in extra labour—that is all."

"I shall pay for it if I don't begin to get home," said Franc, jumping up. "It's early duty

to-morrow; I have to leave our house by ten minutes past seven."

"I used to think it hard when I had to be down to breakfast at seven fifteen in my last school," said Beatrice opening her big eyes. "What an awful life! When do you go off duty, Franc?"

"Oh, at four. Of course, if you begin earlier you end earlier. The Eight Hours Act sees to that. Good-bye, Flair. Look after yourself, old girl. You are growing thin."

"I am growing old," said Flair carelessly. "It's my birthday next Wednesday. Will you congratulate me?"

"I will heartily," said Magda, with no intention of being pathetic. "For it means that you have got through another year, and have one less to live. And that's the truest reason for congratulation. I'm sorry I shan't see you on Wednesday, Flair, but we 'make up' that day."

"Yes, I feared it was hopeless to ask you."

"I am going to just come in and look at you," said Alma, in her purry-purry voice. She was a small person, with an infinite capacity for mothering other and more angular people. Even Flair smiled a wintry smile upon her blandishments.

"All right," she said. "Will you come to luncheon?"

Alma declined—quite rightly, though she did not know it. Flair's idea of luncheon consisted in three mutton sandwiches and a banana, always washed down by the cheap claret. I have lunched with her, and I ought to know. This, however, was not Alma's reason for declining, though it should have been. She had had a call to "try voices" for a musical comedy which necessitated her going to the south side of London at an unearthly hour, and probably getting no meal at all.

"But we ought to be free by three," she said

hopefully. "I'll come in on the way home and borrow a cup of tea, Flair."

"I'll get some sausages, and we will toast them," said Flair thoughtfully. "You will have no lunch, I know, so you may as well have something more substantial than bread and butter."

"That's right--look after her," said Hilda with her soft, quick laugh—a laugh that always had an echo of irony in it, even when she was least ironical, because life had struck her as a sorry jest, and she had learned to treat it as bitter humour, lest she should weep over it. "Good-bye, my child!" She patted Flair's curly head from her loftier height, and linked her arm in Alma's. Beatrice kissed Flair in silence, but was held back till Winnie had followed Magda and Franc into the passage.

"How's the Music Master?" said Flair breathlessly.

The expression went out of Beatrice's face in a curious fashion. She made her brown eyes blank, and stared at Flair as if she locked a secret behind closed doors.

"Oh!—very well, I think!" She spoke in the congratulatory tone of one who assures another of the health of an acquaintance.

Flair sighed., This was worse than Winnie's luncheon party, frankly whispered.

"All right. He is sometimes in a bad temper —that was why I asked," she said good humouredly.

Beatrice hesitated. the silence which seemed to have fallen on her during the long, lonely years at the charitable institution developing very slowly into a faint smile. It was like the twilight of a smile, and hardly lifted the corners of her lips. Flair waited as usual. If one did not ask Beatrice she would sometimes speak.

"He was very nice—yesterday," she said in

the best music of her voice when it remembered happy things. "When we put away the music together, after the lesson was over . . ."

There was another pause. R. L. rose on the table and yawned, as a hint to Flair that he wished to go to bed. Beatrice turned suddenly and kissed the baby rings of hair that lay most incongruously over Flair's broad, masculine forehead.

"Good-night," she said softly, and vanished after the others. Their voices and steps died down the passage: some one whistled a bar of Berlioz' "Faust"—

"Then good-night, alas! From ill-hap who shall stay thee?"

and Winnie laughed. The front door shut with a bang, and darkness seemed to settle once more on the gaunt house.

With a certain weariness in her very movements, the one girl left alone collected the personal belongings she had brought down for the meeting, took down the placard with "Nous Autres" from the door, and carried the lamp up the six flights of stairs. After her fourth journey she looked round inclusively, and saw that all signs of their presence were removed. Then she lifted the sleepy cat and settled him on her left arm like a baby, his limp paws hanging over her shoulder, the solid weight of his great body making her pant a little before she reached her own quarters. But before she actually left the big room downstairs, she paused a minute, looking backwards and forwards, the old expectancy returning to her face and haunting her eyes—horrible eyes, in which the wisdom and sins and experiences of ten centuries seemed to have suffered resurrection. A clock struck ten from a neighbouring church as she stood there. It was

early for the London world, but late for Nous Autres, who lie down that they may rise and live through to-morrow—and so on through countless to-morrows, all shading towards a universal greyness of middle age or a tragedy of poverty-stricken years that end in merciful death. It is the portion to which Nous Autres look, if they dare to look at all. . . .

Flair Chaldecott turned out the gas-lamp and the stove, and went slowly up those many stairs to the attic under the roof.

CHAPTER II

"Each life's unfulfilled, you see—
It hangs still, patchy, and scrappy;
We have not drunk deep, laughed deep,
Starved, feasted, despaired—been happy!

"And nobody thinks you a dunce—
And people suppose me clever;
This could but have happened once—
And we missed it—lost it for ever!"

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE first thing that Magda Burke distinctly remembered in her life was being taught to stand alone. Refused even the support of a chair, she stood a forlorn little figure, in a wilderness of floor, while admonishing voices cried, "Baby must learn to use her own feet! Baby must walk without being led!" Baby did learn—and went on learning the same moral lesson all through her youth. Her untried feet, forced to find their way without encouragement of some one stronger to help her if she fell—the large, terrible room, and the friends that stood afar off: that was the allegory of life of Magda Burke.

Her father was an artistic failure -one of those

men who, as the Americans say," Bust up and go on again." He was always "busting up," but he generally went on again, and his hopefulness was equal to that of Micawber. He was not a good man of business, but he did happen to be a gentleman, and his traditions were those wherein the men work and the women remain at home, in the European version of a Turkish harem. Magda was an only child, and her mother had died at her birth. She was not encouraged to work for the first twenty years of her life; and when she brought common sense to bear upon the periodical smashes of her existence, and suggested that she might help to avert such disasters, she was told by her relations not to trouble herself and to trust in Providence. "You will always be provided for," said the feminine portion of the family piously. "You must just trust in God." There is a certain creed which makes the Deity a kind of managing director of earthly incompetence. The holders of it are largely responsible for the desperate tendency to Agnosticism which is often and loudly condemned by them in a younger and more practical generation.

When Magda was twenty-three her father died suddenly, and the state of his affairs upheld his daughter's theory that the Lord helps those who help themselves, rather than the tenet vaguely relied upon by her relations that "the Lord will provide." She was not entirely thrown on her own helplessness, however, because for two years previously she had been earning her dress allowance by sheer persistence and energy on her own part. She had insisted on that much independence in the face of disapproval and accusations of want of faith; but she did not care to saddle her God with the responsibilities which she considered that He had given to her, and so began to feel her way in a hard world, to her

ultimate salvation. It was the old experience of the nursery floor, and by the time she had learned to trust to her own feet, she had lost faith in the guidance that had been denied her.

"The best thing in the world is Independence," said Magda Burke. "After all, I am quite capable of doing without their help." And she looked elsewhere for assistance, and for sympathy also, concluding that a woman's foes are oftenest those of her own household.

It was not pleasant work which she found; her hours were long, and her pay was little. She was not strong; no girl born and bred in the harass and worry of such a household, and devoid of special training, both of body and mind, is very fitted for a female clerkship such as Magda took. But the half-bred hunter, with the inherited instincts in his blood, will do the uncongenial work before him, and go as well in the cab as the real cab stock, just as long as he can stand. There comes a knacker's day at last; there is a knacker's day for Nous Autres.

Magda had had an irregular education, begun when things were flourishing, discontinued when the periodical "busts up" occurred. At every school she went to she learned drawing, as well as being taught by her father at home, and she developed a talent for Art because it was a pleasure to her. When the final blow came, and she saw her home broken up before her eyes, she went into rooms with a friend some years older than herself, and set her face steadily against the buffets of life, to see what could be made of an unpromising existence. Magda could not live by herself; loneliness of life for lack of physical companionship was as terrible to her as loneliness of mind to Flair Chaldecott. What Flair felt chiefly was the lack of some one who loved the books she loved, who read and thought as she

did, or who at least could realize her standpoint in argument. Amongst her seven particular friends, even, she found only two who did not think her rather odd in her mental tastes, and Magda's half-amused criticism, "You are a *funny* girl, Flair!" filled Flair with a blank despair of being able to explain herself, while the actual living alone did not disturb her at all. Magda, on her side, wanted to "chum" with some one for the human necessity of saying "good morning" and "good night," and went into partnership accordingly. Deborah, the elder girl, had work in the City; Magda's lay nearer the West End. Between the two of them they made something like one hundred and fifty pounds a year, working some nine or ten hours a day. They lived in three small rooms in the vicinity of the Tottenham Court Road, as the most central point for their different destinations; they cooked their own food on a gas stove in a tiny attic they called their kitchen; at first they did their own scrubbing, but unfortunately, though the half-bred hunter can go for some time, and stay until he drops, he cannot pull very heavy loads. Deb and Magda found it a necessary item of expenditure to have a woman in to do the scrubbing. For the rest they bought their clothes as they could, and looked respectable when they went to business; and their diversions were taken as might be, visiting at a few old friends' houses, or getting Press passes for a theatre or concert. But that came later. At first they were too new to their daily grind to have discovered that they required recreation, and too tired after working all day to go out in the evening. There was always hanging over them the horrible dread of one or the other falling ill, with no money to provide for such a contingency, and no friends who could or would help them. Besides which,

it is an inherent and ineradicable characteristic of Nous Autres that when they set their faces to the problem of Work or Starve, they work silently and desperately; they do not whine, they do not ask help, more especially they do not indebt themselves to the few people they may know who possess means or obligations to help them. It may be pride, or it may more probably be an inherited inability to ask for alms. If one of Nous Autres must borrow, she will borrow from another of the society who is as poor or poorer than herself, who will give a few pence or a few shillings according to her means, and who will never refer to it again until, with pain and breathless anxiety, it is saved up and handed back to her, when she says, "Oh, thanks awfully! But are you sure you can spare it? Look here, I've put it out of my calculations, and can go on all right, I think. Don't give it to me if you can't spare it just yet."

Magda had always been able to draw. She sketched in off moments for her own pleasure, and being of a resourceful nature, she dared to send some sketches to an illustrated paper. "I can only be refused," she said to Deb. She was refused, but she tried again—this time personally. She took the sketches to an editor and asked why they were not available. "Well, you see, for one thing they are not drawn for reproduction," he said good-naturedly. "The subject isn't very taking either; but you might have a chance if you understood Press drawing." Magda went home and thought it out. The result of several weeks' inquiries and despairing calculations was that she entered the Birkbeck schools and went through the course devoted to the knowledge she wanted. It was something to do in the evenings, and she loved the work. Then she went back to Fleet Street and battered

in vain at editorial doors for the space of six months, during which time she still drudged through uncongenial work she dared not throw up. She might have had better luck if she had been able to hawk her wares in business hours, but she was often too late to see the men she wanted to see, or unable to pursue an advantage by constant applications. After six months she had a sketch accepted; and then she had another month of discouragement, another set of drawings taken—by a dishonest firm this time, who never paid her—more waiting, more sickening sense of failure, more dogged perseverance in her little leisure. Gradually—gradually—she got a firmer footing in the great murderous world of journalism, which grinds and spares not, and asks impossible work of its victims, and dismisses without reason, and is bought and sold by interest behind the scenes. It is part of the everyday business of Fleet Street to break hearts: the stage is cruel, the musical world crushes and hammers the soul out of all endeavour into a grey monotony of form; but literature and journalism torture first and kill slowly—very slowly—by inches, of a disease which, once caught, shall never be healed again. For the born journalist who once tastes journalism will never, never give it up—until the knacker's day. The Press is the pulse of the moment, the incarnate vitality of to-day, and those who once experience the thrill of being the tiniest particle in that great living force, find all things else a dead and silent world. It is not only that they attain the voice of printed matter, for their hearers may make such an insignificant circle that it does not satisfy the least ambitious; but from the incalculable staff of "The Times" to the short paragraphist in some trivial penny weekly, there is the electric sense of being behind the scenes in the world's drama.

of knowing how the machinery works, of that mysterious link that draws newspaper people together from one end of the Empire to the other.

It was through her profession that Magda met with Flair, and through her with Alma and Franc. Hilda had been a friend of hers before she became literally one of Nous Autres, and Hilda had brought Beatrice into the circle. Thus they amalgamated, and were augmented or decreased in numbers as things chanced. Sometimes Deb would accompany Magda to the society's meetings, but oftener she took that opportunity of visiting friends of her own who were not intimate with Magda. There was a difference of some eight years in the girls' ages, and it gave them, naturally, individual interests.

It was in the early days of her acquaintance with Flair, and before the ordered meetings of the society, that a turn in her circumstances enabled Magda to give up the clerkship she held, and devote all her time to journalism. Her excursions up grimy stairs in Fleet Street had resulted at least in the side issue of an acquaintance amongst men and women who had reached the position for which she was feverishly fighting, and because they liked her they asked her to dubious journalistic gatherings and so-called "Literary At Homes," where all the third-rate "lionesses" of the profession congregated in tumbled gowns. Men were rare at these functions, and were mostly undersized, as if the imbibing of much inky experience had stunted their growth. Magda went to such affairs in the forlorn hope of some day meeting some one with influence, because she never missed a chance, however remote, of forwarding her desire. It was at one of the least hopeful of them that she noticed a man so much taller and less worn than the newspaper writers whom she knew, that she

came to the conclusion that he could not be a journalist at all, and wondered if he felt like a fish out of water. They both, as it happened, charged the refreshment table at the same time in a desperate raid for tea, and, holding out their hands for the same cup, drew back and apologized.

"I beg your pardon," said the man. "Please take it—you had better, while you can."

"Oh, no, you were first," said Magda honestly. "I can wait, really. I shall get some in time, I have no doubt."

She spoke with the simplest self-confidence in waiting on herself. As it happened, she knew but few people in the room, and took it for granted that if she wanted tea she must make an effort for it. Life was one great effort to Magda; she never sat down helplessly in a corner and wailed that she had not been served. If when she left the feast of existence she went hungry, it would not be from incompetence on her part.

The tall man looked down at her and smiled. Something seemed to have amused him and arrested his attention. It was one of Magda's good days; when her eyes were blue and her hair had golden lights in it. Tire or discouragement or hardship drained the colour out of her body as well as out of her mind; but it was the fiat of the gods that she should have her share of vitality just now.

"Supposing you take this cup and let me get you something to eat," he said quietly; "and then I will find you a seat."

Magda's independence was essentially a feminine quality. It just stopped short of resisting masculine authority—of the right sort. "Thank you," she said meekly, though she was in fact rather surprised at herself.

As a matter of fact, he found two seats in a secluded corner, and having supplied himself also with tea, they sat down and had it together. The talk turned naturally upon the profession most in evidence around them; but why at the end of ten minutes, Magda found herself confiding all her aspirations and the hopeless outlook before her to a total stranger, she was never able to explain, and was so convinced that it was inexcusable that she always defended it earnestly to Flair and Hilda. He listened gravely, with a searching gaze into her discouraged face, and at the end he said, "I think I can help you. At least, I can give you a chance to help yourself."

"But are you a journalist?" said Magda blankly, her very real surprise making him laugh. "I have been feeling more sure every minute that you had nothing to do with them."

"Why, I wonder?" he said rather quizzically. "I thought I was rather well known in Fleet Street. It seems I flattered myself."

"I dare say you are," said Magda drily. "But I do not happen to know your name."

He told it to her, and for the minute she wished she had never confided in him. He was Editor of an illustrated weekly, a well-established paper backed by a great firm, and had control also of a smaller paper which his people had but lately started. These things were a matter of common report, and it seemed to her that he must think she was not telling the truth, and had talked to him from self-interest.

"I did not really know who you were," she said impulsively, the sting of her sensitive pride bringing tears into the blue of her eyes. Magda's emotions were as quick as her wits; she felt vividly, and on the spur of the moment, laughter or tears coming to her as easily as her trick of

verbal retort. Beatrice called her "April's Lady."

"I know," said the Editor composedly. "I have realized that. What I propose to do is to give you a trial on the smaller of our papers, if your work is good enough. Can you come up and see me to-morrow, and bring some as a specimen?"

"Yes," said Magda breathlessly.

"Very well, to-morrow afternoon at four. By the way, can you write paragraphs?"

"Oh, yes, I have done that often."

"That is a good thing, as I can give you more work. By Jove! I must be going—it's past six. Good-bye!"

He shook hands with Magda, but she could not speak. The gates of her paradise seemed for the moment slowly opening to her, and the angel who had wrought the miracle was the tall man pushing his way impatiently through the chattering crowd. To him it was a passing freak, and he forgot her long before he left the room, having merely offered his help to a rather interesting type that had saved his being unutterably bored at a dull function. At the same time that he had made a physical note of Magda's name, he made a mental one that he would never attend another afternoon reception of the same kind; that he had gone there and talked to a girl—who had blue eyes—in a corner, was the merest incident. He kept his promise to himself, and never did attend such an entertainment again. The meeting was a chance one that might never have taken place save for a disposition of Providence that might almost be called faintly ironical.

Magda went home to cook the dinner which she was too excited to eat; but her nerves, which threatened to play her false, had been worn down to a more uniform endurance by the endless

mirages of false hope which she had seen across her desert, and by the next morning she was as depressed as she had been elated. She looked at Deb over the forlorn breakfast table in the little attic under the roof, and her eyes were piteous.

"It is no use my going; the work won't be what he wants. They have all said that," she said wretchedly, blinking away the tears.

"Yes, but he must be personally interested in you," said Deb, with the cruel shrewdness born of those eight years ahead of Magda. "It makes all the difference. The others looked at your work first—he has looked at you."

"I don't care for it if he helps me just because —just because I was nice to him," said Magda with hurt pride, and a mental inspection of yesterday's smiles. "I should simply hate his charity." Again she saw the strong, self-reliant face of the tall Editor, and writhed a little for lack of his acknowledgment of what she could do.

"It doesn't matter. He'll give you your chance, and you can prove that you are worth it. He wouldn't trouble about the chance if he had not looked at you." Deb was unintentionally cynical in her consolation. "Do eat something, Magda! You will look like a ghost if you don't."

But Magda was too finely strung that morning to swallow grilled bacon. Her appetite was fastidious suddenly; she saw that the charwoman had not rubbed the forks this week, and that the cloth was stained. What would the Editor, in his immaculate shirt-cuffs, think of murky plate and such damask as that? Life, by the standard of his well-groomed success, seemed suddenly sordid and unfit for women. She had had no chance to do household duties this last week, beyond the necessary preparing of food. She thought of inviting him up here! . . . It was no use trying to be dainty and feminine. The stress of bare exis-

tence battered such desires out of the way, and to be merely cleanly and honest appeared unsatisfactory at the moment. Magda felt suddenly humiliated by all the little shifts that destroy so much of the pleasure of a woman's life: the wearing of dark clothes even in the summer to save washing, the "doing without" of linen collars and cuffs in the winter, when office and writing-desk soil them in an hour. Most of Nous Autres never even dreamed of white shirts and blouses in summer time; they wore striped things, greys and dark blues for choice, that do not soil; while white underskirts were grievous luxuries; and as to the delightful linen coats and skirts that women affect in hot weather, they ranked with the peaches in the fruiterers' windows that cost sixpence at cheapest and were like diamonds as far as attainment went. It is in the little ways of saving and making shift that the woman's tragedy comes in —in the carrying her own parcels to save postage within a possible radius, in the wearing of old skirts in doubtful weather because she knows that she has only one decent gown that must face the searching sunlight—next year. It is nothing to a woman, comparatively speaking, to starve herself, or to eke out a week in a cheap neighbourhood for all her annual holiday, with no money for excursions. These things may kill her eventually but they are to be borne, the others, the pin-pricks of every day and all day, go on for so long (dear God! how long it is to look back through years of such rigid economies!) that they wear the heart out of her.

Later on that morning, when Deb had departed, Magda brushed her most respectable skirt and cleaned her shoes, for she had not to leave the house quite so early as her friend. Dressing to go out generally involves these preliminary details with Nous Autres, who are perpetually in a

scramble in consequence, and loathe the sight of blacking and brushes as no boot-boy can do, for at least it is the boot-boy's business, and to Magda and her kind it comes as an extra in the ordinary routine of bread-winning. She had to go to business as usual, but by making a special appeal to those in authority over her, she really got off early and rode down to Fleet Street. The omnibus jolted, and Magda's head ached; she had not had time to go home and freshen herself up, or have tea, and when she presented herself at the doors of her destination, it was with a depressed feeling that all the charm of yesterday had gone from her—she almost doubted its existence as she sat in the outer office waiting for the deity within to send and summon her to the inner sanctuary. As she sat there she wondered how many men and women had waited wearily in her place, hoping against hope, infinitely weary with tramping from office to office, and finally proved so unimportant that instead of ever reaching the Editor they were merely dealt with by a clerk, who demanded and dismissed their business in the toneless voice of official routine.

"I shall never forget all this—never!" said Magda, catching her breath. "Though I succeeded a hundred times, the chill of poverty would still be in my bones—I should never forget the days of the Outer Office!" No one who succeeds after such experience ever does.

She had grown so used to being refused a hearing, that she felt a dull surprise on being at last bidden to follow to the Editor's own room. Her friend had not forgotten her—perhaps he had hardly had time to do so—and he rose and shook hands. She looked at the strong, spare figure, and remembered her own whimsical depression over his shirt-cuffs. Certainly they were immaculate, and he wore his clothes with an ease

which does not often go with such a position as his. Magda's own hands were her best point; they had not only the approved points of filbert nails, soft white skin, and delicate modelling, they had character as well. I have seen many beautiful women's hands which were as correct in form as Magda's, though utterly helpless; but I remember no others that were at once well-bred and perfectly artistic. She had taken off her gloves to untie the precious drawings she brought as samples, and the slim fingers lay pleasantly in the Editor's as he looked down on her.

"Well," he said, "let's get to business at once. Show me what you can do."

She liked that, for the suggestion of challenge put her on her mettle, and the business quality of his tone destroyed her fear of personal bias. One after another she laid a few of her best black-and whites on the desk, and his face did not cloud.

"Yes," he said. "You do this sort of thing quite well enough—a good deal better than the average draughtsman, in fact."

"Then *why* is it that I find it so difficult to get anything accepted?" Magda exclaimed.

"My dear child," he said drily, "I did not say you were a genius. If your work were strikingly original, you would make your way eventually, because every Editor in London is keenly on the scent for genius—always. But the market is packed with average work, and it is backed by interest. Yours may be above the average, but that does not outweigh the added interest. Some day you will understand all that, I am afraid, better than I care to explain it to you."

"But it seems so unfair!" said the Magda of those days still strong in her youth and its demand for justice.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It is the way of

all trades—journalism among the rest. Anyhow, I am very glad to give you the chance you wanted."

Afterwards she remembered his talk of this "interest" unpossessed by her, and found its darker meaning that he had held back. At the time she merely thought he meant, literally, introductions or some obligation to help her which she had always lacked. He was kind and courteous, as well as encouraging at this second meeting, and showed her a small inner room where she could work on certain days in the week after her business hours, correcting proofs for him, and looking through the drawings and photographs submitted to the smaller paper. The last lady who had done this kind of sub-editing had had the room entirely to herself, he said, but that was before he joined the staff. Magda wondered for a moment who her predecessor had been, but he did not explain further, and she forgot the matter in the more absorbing interest of arranging the details of her connexion with the paper. Even when it was all settled, it seemed to her a chance too happy in all its aspects to really belong to her, and she was surprised to find that her hands were trembling, and her eyes half blind with tears, when she stepped out once more into the steep rise of Norfolk Street.

"I *will* work hard," said Magda, looking up instinctively at the grey sky between the grey houses, as if to Someone up there in command of all the greyness of London. "I am very thankful—very grateful. Indeed, I will do my best."

She did not immediately throw up the clerkship, but it came inevitably with time. At first she worked at the office in Norfolk Street after her day's work as a female clerk was done, or on half-holidays, or when she could get off earlier; and her Editor helped her, and made things

easier with his powerful authority. She grew to look upon him as the incarnation of power—as some one on whom to rely as certainly as if he could not fail her—even more certainly than she relied on herself. The Second Commandment is not the least brittle in a woman's hands by reason of her physical infirmities; for she is prone to make a graven image in whom to trust under sufficient masculine provocation. Magda did not know what this new intercourse was growing to be in her life, or the domination over her of one man's force of character. She told Deb that she was afraid of her Editor, and that sometimes she wanted to rebel against his emphatic authority. Perhaps she did; certainly she trembled occasionally at the sound of his voice or step, or the knock on the door which she knew, and hid it under a greater audacity of manner which she marvelled that he pardoned. There were few of those working under Magda's Editor who presumed to jest with him.

She had been combining her old employment and the new for a month, when one day he summoned her into his own office, and showed her the page proofs of the paper to which she contributed.

"Have you ever learned to 'make up'?" he said quietly.

"No," said Magda, distressfully conscious that the blank sheet intersected by a single line and the long printer's pulls on the desk meant nothing to her mind.

"It is a useful thing to know; you ought not to be ignorant of it," he said. "Sit down, and I will give you a lesson."

If he was a good teacher, Magda was an excellent pupil. She fought her way rapidly through the mysteries of outers and inners, how to measure up, the space allowed to the "Ads,"

and—most trying of all on an illustrated—the amount of letterpress for the printers to overrun round the blocks. The Editor did not really help her there, for she made up all through her journalistic life by a process of her own, which she never could explain to a subordinate, calculating headlines and illustrations by dint of a ruler, and a form of addition and subtraction but which always came out correctly. In the space of a few lessons she was competent to pass the paper for press, though her Editor looked it through afterwards; and his few words of satisfaction and praise brought the vitality to her face like a stimulant, and made her a pretty girl, with blue eyes, pink cheeks, and happy lips, though she might have been dull and tired throughout the day. It was just the changes in April's Lady that gave her what she had of charm, and its very evanescence was its great danger. A man never knew that, just when he was feeling disappointed in her looks, she would not flash out upon him with a sudden colour and life, and even as he turned away saying, "Why, she is a plain girl! 'behold! she gave him the lie by being a pretty one.

"You will be of great use to me," said the Editor at last. "I shall be able to leave some of the work to you, and look up the advertisement department. I want to do that; the paper has been shamefully neglected by the man before me. Do you think it would pay you to leave your present berth and come here every day, if we gave you a settled salary?"

The gates of Paradise opened a little wider, and Magda set her foot inside. When she went home that day to Deb, the flush of its radiance was still in her face, and her heart was warm within her. She thought that her angel would always stand at the gate; it did not occur to her that he had only opened it, for his part.

Yet she never actually saw much of him; and these lives, running side by side in office hours, did not intersect beyond. Sometimes they had tea together, when he had something to say to her about the work; but it was always about the work, and they only drifted to other abstract subjects when some detail started a side issue. Magda's Editor was a gentleman by birth and breeding—the sort of man whom Franc had said that Nous Autres had no chance to know—and he treated Magda as one of his own world. She had not found any such before up the grimy Fleet Street staircases. There had been men there—sometimes too automatic to do more than thrust her appeals aside in the absorption of business, sometimes enough of a male animal to see that she was a woman . . . and then she had turned and fled. But this man never once held the cool, pretty hand she offered him beyond the time of regulation greeting, never deepened the kindly encouragement of his tone into a personal thrill, never looked at her with eyes that asked more than comprehension. Yet he must have been human enough to appreciate the quick sympathy that never failed him in the smaller office, for when he was tired, or worried, or annoyed, he always went to her; and she, being a woman, gloried in giving, and never asked for a return. Only once in all their intercourse he laid his hand on her shoulder; he had come to her with a minor irritation (the stupidity of a member of the staff, which it was beneath his dignity to notice, and which nevertheless galled him in his work, like the infinitesimal sting of the tsetse fly does the African horses); Magda had not said much, but he had felt the electric response and understanding in her.

"There is an affinity between us, I think," he said with a sigh of partial relief. "I know no

one else whose mind responds to mine so quickly as yours. It takes up half the burden, somehow."

Magda did not answer. She sat still at her desk, her eyes very suddenly blue as they stared at the trivial things before her—the ink and the office stamp, the ruler, the scissors, the paste-pot, all the details of her trade—for the Editor had laid his strong hand on her shoulder. She sat dumb under the pressure, wondering what came next, or if he knew how he was leaning on her—physically as well as mentally—just now. Perhaps he laid a heavier burden on her then than he knew, or perhaps he over-estimated the self-reliance which in her always amused him. It was a typical instance of this that he had come into the smaller office one day at the beginning of her tenancy, to find her energetically moving the ink-stained table to the further side of the room.

"Couldn't you ring the bell, Miss Burke?" he remarked drily. "The office-boy could do that for you."

"But I wanted it in a better light," Magda protested. "And I can't be waiting half the morning for the office-boy. It takes time to ring bells and have them answered. And I am accustomed to do things for myself."

"So it seems. There are plenty of people to do them for you here, however."

He put her very gently but irresistibly on one side, and rolled the table into the position she wished. Magda noticed vaguely how strongly his sinewy hands gripped the heavy piece of furniture, and how fastidiously kept they were. The blood rose to her face with her quick habit of blushing, and she laughed a little impatiently.

"It is much worse to make the Editor do it than to do it myself, it seems to me," she said.

"If it is beneath my dignity, it is positively sacrilegious for you."

"Not to assist a lady," he returned composedly. "If you want any of this sort of work done, you will ask me to help you, please, if you don't care to wait for the office-boy. But you will not do it yourself."

Had it been any one else who asserted that "You will not," rather than asked, "Will you?" Magda's independence would have been up in arms in a minute. She almost hated herself for the meekness of her own voice as she said, "Very well," and the irrepressible feeling of satisfaction in being taken charge of in this way. The remainder of the staff found her rather belligerent than otherwise, for she was quick to take offence just as she was generous to forgive. The little jars and disagreeable incidents of office life were serious trials to Magda; she took the ill-nature caused by jealousy as personal dislike, and under any less broadly masculine control than that of the man with whom Fate had placed her, she might have made more enemies than friends. He played upon the finely-strung over-wrought temperament with as masterful a touch as a musician does upon a violin, controlling and guiding and exercising an authority against which she would have chafed elsewhere—and the secret was the old eternal secret of masculine and feminine nature completing and complementing each their opposite. However thin-skinned Magda proved to other men and women in the journalistic world, to her Editor she was always the same, and always ready to hear reason. Just as his mere presence drew up her vitality—so that though she might have been looking dispirited before, his appearance changed her eyes from grey to the bluer tint, and seemed to flood the colour back into her whole nervous body—so his

mind demanded and obtained the best in hers In his memory she always was, and remained, a pretty woman.

There was no doubt that Magda's work improved rapidly at this period, partly from the stimulus of desiring the Editor's approbation—for a woman, however much she loves her art, will always accomplish most before an audience of One. It was a happy time, though not altogether a peaceful one. Long years after, when Magda was herself editing a flourishing sixpenny, of which she was part proprietor, she looked back to her novitiate with a little sigh, and thought that all the success could not quite equal the glow and glory of her first staff appointment. She forgot the strain and the anxiety and the physical disadvantages which handicapped her youth. Perhaps the heaviest drawback with which she had to contend was neuralgia, for she was constantly racked with it, and there were times when she did her work with one hand pressed against her temples, while the other held the pen. It was a purely natural outcome of the overstrain of her life, the ill-feeding, the anxiety, the earnest desire to prove herself capable in her present position, and it is her best testimonial that it did not drive her to drugs—that panacea of the working woman when life becomes too unbearable, and which is a short cut to the end of it. Magda was bearing pain about four days in the week like a little heroine, working side by side with men whose superior physique could not conceive of the effect of the strain upon hers, and by contrast with whom she was once more proved the weaker vessel. We are learning sense and justice now, and training our girl children as carefully as schoolboys, to fit them at least to endure hardship. In a few generations we shall produce women with as sound a constitution as

men's, and civilization will so far have mitigated the conditions of City life that they will not drop off like flies under forty. But Nous Autres represent the locusts whose dead bodies were swept down the river until the mass of them formed a bridge whereby those following might pass over. It sounds a high-flown assertion to say that Magda's body was tortured in order that fifty years hence women may earn their right to exist under advantageous circumstances, but—many locusts went to the forming of the bridge, and each unit helped the whole.

Neuralgia was the medium through which she recalled the crises of her existence, for it generally formed a factor in all the important scenes of her life. She remembered it inevitably, like a red thread running through the tissue of gold and grey, and marking the pattern. So there came a point in her connexion with the Editor which to look back upon seemed to her a delirium of pain—both physical and mental. Everything went wrong that day; they had been "making-up" for the Spring Number, and the advertisement manager had demanded more space, and that meant cutting down matter already accepted. Magda pressed her fingers into her temples to hold the red-hot nerve which threatened to swell the veins to bursting, and flung herself upon the proof. The usual features *must* stay—they meant the popularity of the paper. Had any one ever cut out the serial in a Spring Number? she wondered, her dazed blue eyes following the hopelessly fat columns and the half-tone process blocks that would not bear reducing further. She was practically doing editorial work just now, and looking forward to a rise in salary if she successfully managed the smaller paper without much help from her harassed chief. At present she drew two pounds a week, and thought herself

lucky; but the Editor told her honestly that he was only letting his firm pay her "starvation wages" until he could arrange something better and get her an accepted position in the office. "On anything over a hundred a year I can save," said Magda, doing outside work in her evenings, and slaving all day. Her work certainly did not suffer in itself, but her health did, and her head was particularly bad that morning. Then the Sub-Editor of the larger paper came into the room with his hat on, and said "Good morning, Miss Burke," without taking it off. Men soon lose the niceties of their manners to women in an office. Magda should by this time have grown used to being treated like any other clerk—she should perhaps have been grateful for the "good morning"—but she found it hard to forget her womanhood, and remember that she ranked a little lower than the printers in importance.

"Good morning, Mr. Hope," she said, the more courteously for his covered head—her own politeness always became punctilious on these occasions. "Can I do anything for you?"

The Sub-Editor had come to grumble, not to ask assistance. He was worried, and his first instinct was to shift the burden on to the weaker pair of shoulders belonging to the girl before him. He did not pause to think of the white face, or the strained eyes turned anxiously to the page proof. He claimed, as a matter of course, the sympathy which Magda had been giving to the more selfish natures all round her since she came into the office.

"Seen the Chief this morning?" he said abruptly.

"No!" Magda's nerves braced themselves with a momentary interest. The Editor's name never struck on her ears quite as dully as other men's—it was like a coloured thing in a drab world.

"There's been a holy row," said the Sub sitting on the edge of the ink-stained table and thrusting his hands into his pockets. "The proprietor was down yesterday, and made his ignorance of advertisements blissfully apparent He wanted to know why this was done, and why that was done, and to alter the lines of the whole paper!"

"But," exclaimed Magda, bewildered, "the paper is going splendidly. Every one says that the Editor has doubled the circulation, and worked up the advertisement department so that it pays three times what it used!"

"I know," said the Sub impatiently. "But that's just journalism. You get a good man who knows the ropes and makes the paper pay, and then the fool of a Proprietor wants to have a finger in the pie and assert his authority. That's the real secret, Miss Burke—the old ass couldn't stand the Editor having so much power in his hands. I won't say the Chief doesn't boss it a bit over every one"—(Magda recognized a grievance here)—"but apart from his manner, he's a rattling good man for the place. They'll never get such another."

Magda's heart seemed to throb steadily for an instant or so, like the pendulum of a clock; then it surely stopped dead. The meaning of the Sub-Editor's coming into her room to tell her of the fracas dawned on her as if it danced before her in red letters.

"Has the Editor—resigned?" she said sharply, in the clutch of her physical and mental pain.

"H—sh! Don't speak so loud. Nothing is officially settled yet. Yes, he's pretty safe to leave, and we go after him," said the Sub gloomily. It doesn't matter for him—he's one of the best men in London, and he's had three better offers than this show since he's been here.

He won't go begging; it's the rest of the whole damned staff who will suffer—you and I amongst them," he added brutally.

Perhaps he did not realize what this meant to the girl before him whose lips were so steady, and whose pretty hand, holding the blue pencil, was so untremulous. He thought afterwards that Miss Burke took it very well, for it was serious for her, poor girl! But in her mind's eye Magda saw once more the blank, weary streets, the doors closed against her efforts, the old sickening round of anxious tramping while the pence pile grew lower and lower, and one calculated anxiously that bread and a penny packet of desiccated soup was all that must be afforded to-day. It seemed worse now than it had been before she felt the security of the office round her. Perhaps the relief of settled and congenial work had unnerved her—perhaps she had learned to depend too much on the masculine strength and assistance which seemed to be leaving her life as suddenly as it had come into it. It is a sorry day for one of Nous Autres when she begins to trust to any aid save the self-reliance with which her God has specially endowed her.

"But," said Magda in a low, bewildered tone, "I do not quite see why there should be a clean sweep of us all. Of course, the Editor is free to resign if the Proprietor does not leave him enough authority, or questions his work; but surely we have done nothing to be turned off. Why, it is as bad as sending a servant away without a character!"

"Oh! well, you see, the old fool"—(Magda began to recognize the esteemed head of her firm under this title)—"will have back the last Editor, for certain. They were always pals, because he was a man who grovelled to those in authority, and he was only turned out because he was

making such a hash of the whole thing. They will have to have a real Advertisement Manager, I expect—you know ours only works under the Chief's direction—and leave him to mess up the letterpress."

"I don't see why you or I should go, even if he does come back. Isn't he a friend of yours?"

The Sub gave her a quick, queer look. Magda's eyes were grey with tire, and her face was dispirited and colourless. But she looked a young, slight figure, little more than a girl in appearance. . . .

"No," he said curtly. "He was no friend of mine; and he will not be of yours, if you knew him. He will have the woman back who was here before you, too, to take her old place again, as surely as he comes into the office."

"The married woman who was always late with her copy, and wrote slovenly English! Surely I am better at the work than she was!"

"So you are—ten thousand times. But that won't save your dismissal." He laughed shortly.

"But why?" Magda stared with all her strained face. It was obvious that she saw no reason in an acknowledged change for the worse between her and her predecessor. She was blankly incredulous. The Sub-Editor got off the table and turned away to light a cigarette.

"Miss Burke," he said, and there was if anything a shade more respect in his tone, "that woman will turn you out and take your place because she is a 'friend' of the last Editor. She will give—what you would not dream of giving. Are you woman of the world enough to understand me?"

The desperate hope of justice and of keeping her position because she merited it, faded slowly out on Magda's mental horizon. She saw it vanish like the rainbow of hope, and the bitterness of her

own struggle to live decently and work honestly tasted like poison on her tongue. She could not misunderstand, for years of making her own living had taught her to see this poor, ugly world of humanity very plainly. But she belonged to Nous Autres—women who walk with clean feet through the streets of experience, or if they touch pitch, feel their defilement as a brand upon them—and so such an outline of knowledge had not seemed to affect her personally. Now it appeared necessary to take it into calculation, and for the minute she could not speak because she had lost faith in the purpose of her existence, and saw only her own sex up for hire, and apparently her single marketable possession—

"Even God's providence
Seeming estranged!"

"Yes," she said at last, quietly, "I am woman of the world enough to understand you. I see that I shall go."

She took up the blue pencil again, and began to make rough notes for the printers. The Sub-Editor went out of the room, back to his own paper, and a great silence seemed to fill the outer offices—the silence that is full of the familiar sounds of one's life. The open windows let in the far-off hum of the Strand and the sound of passers-by in Norfolk Street; a door banged in another department of the newspaper office, and the lift-bell rang. Magda went on mechanically with her work, as if no moral eruption had taken place in her life. She felt as if she were numb, and working purely by habit, and was dully surprised to find that her capacities did not fail her at all. A process block was smudgy, and she noted the fact to the head printer, asking him to tell the machinists to see that it was properly washed. It was only when it came to lunch-time,

and she went out as usual, that she found she could not eat, and gave up the effort, finding that food choked her.

She did not see the Editor all day, and thought that he was not in the office, until suddenly, at four o'clock, she heard his rap on the door, and raised her head languidly to say "Come in!" He came in with a cup of tea in his hand, and set it down beside her with one of his straight looks into her self-betraying face.

"Has hope been in here talking to you, Miss Burke?" he said quietly.

"Yes—earlier in the day," she answered, with sudden difficulty.

"Then before we say a word more I should like to reassure your mind on one point. I do not intend you to stay here if I leave; for one thing, your work is too good for the position you hold, and your present salary, and I only intended it as a temporary help to you. For another—there are other reasons." He shut his lips and looked out of the open windows at the roofs opposite, while Magda's face flamed.

"It is all right," he said after a minute, in his kindest tones. "I have, I think, found you a better berth on another paper, or if that won't do, I will look for something else. There is plenty of time before us, and we neither of us leave for another three months, according to contract. Anyhow, you may be sure that you shall have my help, and I am not boasting when I say that you need not worry about your immediate future. Of course, whether you go up or down the ladder depends on yourself mainly, but I mean to give you a start. You needn't thank me," he added, glancing away from the quick tears in the blue eyes. "You have thoroughly deserved it."

There was a minute's silence. Magda put her hand out vaguely to the tea, and gulped it down

fighting for her self-control. The partial removal of the strain shook her as the ill tidings earlier in the day had not succeeded in doing, and showed her how terrible the outlook had been from the relief which followed. But it showed her something else, too—the personality of the man before her—grafted on her life, and the ascendancy he had gained, revealed by the blank dismay of realizing that that at least she must lose.

"I suppose," she said, trying to smile, "that I shall not be lucky enough to work under you again?"

"No, I think not," he returned, still kindly, however. "I wish I could arrange it; but what I mean to do will not allow of your being with me."

"I see . . . I am very grateful to you, anyhow, for—for your kindness, and for thinking of me."

The bravery of her tone passed him by, but he felt the pathos of her drawn face, and softened still more than was usual with him.

"You look as if you were worn out with anxiety and the Spring Number. It was too bad of Hope to come and burst this on you, when we are already working you to death. I wish I had been able to come and reassure you earlier in the day, but I did not know you had had an account of yesterday's affair until half an hour ago. Did you have any lunch, child?"

"Not much," said Magda briefly. She was beginning to wish that the strain would relax, for she felt that a very little more would show her the breaking-point of her endurance.

"You had better smoke a cigarette," he said, in his authoritative manner. "And when you have rested a little, go out and get something to eat. Don't wait for that late supper of yours."

"How do you know that I have a late

supper?" said Magda, with a strained smile, as she mechanically added the "inscript" at the foot of a paragraph—"Lady Z——and her children in their charming home life"—with an ironical remembrance that she knew actually nothing about Lady Z—— except a private rumour that she had come perilously near the Divorce Court last year!

"I know more about you than you think," said the Editor, in an inscrutable tone. For a minute he lingered, almost as if seized with an unprecedented impulse. He looked at the young brown head leaning on the characteristic hand, and the soft hair falling round Magda's disheartened blue eyes; but the girl was fighting too desperate a battle to heed him. She wished he would go—that was all. She was tired of the struggle, and utterly weary of the relentless emotions to which she seemed to have no right. Life was too vindictive for her just then; it had no aspect that did not show the face of a foe, and she would have been glad to throw up the contest.

"Why doesn't he go? What is the use of over-taxing me like this?" she thought fretfully. "It is nothing to him; he comes out of it all with credit. It must be nothing to me either . . . to-morrow."

Unfortunately it is with to-day that we have to wrestle, and the morrow to which we entrust our promises is no healer of the present pain. By and by the door shut, and that was all the intimation that Magda had of something passing out of her life. And yet she felt it go, and felt, too, that the time that must pass before the actual dissolution of their daily association held nothing like this. If there had been anything more, to do or to say, it would have sprung to life in the stress of the moment which showed them the dividing-line. It was plain that there was noth-

ing more. She went on working for a time, disregarding his advice to go out and get something to eat. Then when the boy came for the sheets and she had handed them out with a long sigh of relief, she lit a cigarette and began to smoke. The office was very quiet now; almost all the staff had left; but she had the key of her own room, and had sometimes been there until eight or nine o'clock when there was a pressure of work. She smoked quite quietly, enjoying it, and wondering at her own deliberation, as if she were somehow outside herself—a new consciousness that watched her physical and mental body. At last she laid the little burnt end down on the pen-tray, and, rising, walked over to the window and looked out. . . .

It is always Sunday in Norfolk Street after six o'clock. The business of the day seems to have been folded up and locked in with the offices, and the feet of passers-by become startlingly distinct. The Strand roared softly still, but it was the roar of recreation—pleasure-seekers going to dinner or the theatre after business. Magda looked down idly, feeling the enervating spring air lift the hair lightly from her forehead as if it rejoiced in her womanhood. It was like a caress, and it made her shiver. There were to be none such things in her life—the gentle side of existence was a snare laid for weary feet. If one longed for it, or turned one's eyes for a minute from the goal of hard work, the punishment was out of all proportion to the transgression. "I have been a fool," she told herself in her hard, young condemnation. "There is nothing for me but the things I earn for myself—success by sheer hard labour, and the money comforts that success brings. I have always stood by myself—I always shall."

Back on her sensitive memory flashed the sly

Accno 106

degrees by which she had come to confide too much in another's strength. She saw each successive step, and the growing compliance of her feminine attitude to that of the man. Where was her independence now? It had come to this, that she did not want to depend on herself—she would gladly have yielded to the authority of one man whose decision had usurped her own. A panic seized her—a fear that she was going to have to suffer pain which she might call by no definite name.

"I am tired—it is just that I am tired of responsibility to-night," she said breathlessly. "It is only for the moment." She kept on repeating it over and over in a whisper, as if to soothe herself. "It is only for the moment. . . . To-morrow . . ."

Up above the roof lines an indifferent heaven hung beyond the appeal of outstretched hands; down below in Norfolk Street the ghostly sound of unseen feet passed by, going homeward. Between the two the girl without a home stood and looked at life. It was not encouraging.

CHAPTER III

"There may be Heaven—there must be Hell;
Meantime there is our Earth here—Well!"

ROBERT BROWNING.

THE naming of Flair Chaldecott was on this wise. A certain Editor, in referring to her, said, "Oh, Miss Chaldecott has what the French call 'le flair'; she knows the direction of public taste almost before it comes. It is a good gift—for a journalist." She had up till then signed her copy "F. Chaldecott"; nor did any one know or care what "F" should stand for. In

the trade she was mistakenly recognized as a man, many Editors never setting eyes on her to the end, and continuing their error through a certain quality in her work which was never feminine. But that section of the Press which knew her as a personality adopted the word in default of a better transcription, and she became "Flair" Chaldecott to them, until the inverted commas were lost, and she was Flair Chaldecott to the inside as well as the outside world. She came from nowhere, and her existence was bounded exactly by what Nous Autres knew of her. She lived in two little rooms at the top of a gaunt building off Duncannon Street, Strand, with an occasional reversion to the big one used for the meetings of the society. She had no ties beyond Nous Autres, and her possessions, when she died, amounted to twenty pounds in the Post Office (which buried her), and certain trifling profits from two volumes of short stories—the only books she ever published. These went to Alma, who also inherited her personal belongings; and if, among them, she found any private information concerning Flair, she never spoke of it.

Mrs. Bonnet was caretaker in the gaunt house, which really belonged to a Company which some day intended taking possession of the whole premises for an elaborate scheme in trade, but at present were so entangled in law that it seemed a remote possibility. Mrs. Bonnet cooked for Flair, and—occasionally—dusted her rooms, but as Flair was liable to fits of ferocity if a paper of her innumerable belongings were moved, there was small inducement to the woman to attempt much order. As she, as caretaker, forced her employers to pay inhabited house duty, she saw no reason against sub-letting the attics, though she warned Flair that when the Company's

affairs were straightened out, they might both of them have to go at a minute's notice. Flair took the risk, and lived there for some years; a few forlorn firms of the Photographic Plate or Architectural Association type using the intermediate floors by day. She rarely encountered the clerks on the dirty staircase, and as the downstairs room remained sacred to the packing-cases and Nous Autres, she was content. One strong reason for her remaining was an urgent one, almost incomprehensible to any one but Nous Autres—the luxury of cleanliness. The house off Duncannon Street had originally been built for residence and not offices, and the dressing-room used by Nous Autres at their meetings was also a bath-room. Why it had been placed on the ground rather than the upper floors was a mystery probably connected with hot-water pipes and the kitchen range; but there it was, and the first sight of it made Flair a tenant. Mrs. Bonnet did not hold with bathing—her sympathies were more towards the methods of R. L. in his toilet—and the clerks on the intermediate floors made no raid upon the place either; but Flair asked, and obtained, leave to use the bath, provided she gave Mrs. Bonnet no further trouble over her ablutions at all. As a matter of sacred solemnity she confided her extraordinary luck to Nous Autres, and admitted them to the privilege of the bath, every one of them sharing in the labour involved. No one who has not lived in cheap lodgings in side streets of London, or even a low-rented house, realizes the joy of a real bath-room; Nous Autres usually possess their own small tubs, and bribe an unwilling servant to carry up meagre cans of water as often as may be—they would do it themselves if a pump were accessible. But when Mrs. Bonnet cooked, somewhere in the bowels of the earth it seemed

to Flair, by a process of enchantment there was plenty of hot water, and one had only to turn the tap, and soak! Mrs. Bonnet had a weakness for a good coal fire, and her range was a large one; Flair nearly got water on the brain—physically as well as mentally—with cleaning out the bath, and Magda and Franc took turns at scrubbing the bare boards. They subscribed for the usual accessories of the place, booked their occupancy beforehand, and revelled.

Alma had been down before the next meeting of the Society, had gone into the bath-room feeling gritty (she had been in and out of Agents' all day), and emerged with her self-respect restored. When she appeared, the other chairs were occupied, and an extra one to boot, for Beatrice had brought a friend with her—a teacher with qualifications above her own and the brown eyes of a hungry deer. Nous Autres called her "B.A." to enforce her title to the degree, and she would have been permanently of the circle had she not been stationed at Croydon, with the fare to consider. Alma sat down next to her and purred.

"That was like Heaven!" she said. "I haven't felt clean since last time. Any matches, Flair?"

"I've got them." B.A. tossed them into her lap. "I hope they will build bath-rooms to the 'many mansions' up above, I'm sure!"

"A good many of us will need cleaning by that time," said Beatrice drily. "I wonder whether physical comfort is an element of Heaven!"

"Anyhow, physical *dis*comfort isn't!" said Franc. "That's good enough for me. They have crowded up the lunch-room so lately, that it is just like struggling at the pit door of a theatre to get to the order desk."

What is your system?" asked Winnie interestedly. "Do you pay so much and choose from the list?"

"Yes. You go and read what the waitress calls the Mennoo, and then buy your ticket for the item you fancy."

"Do they feed you well?"

"Oh, the food is all right of itself—only there's no time to eat it. One of the nicest things one gets is stuffed breast of veal, and really I had quite a shock the other day. I had ordered that particular dish and forgot to say what vegetables; so the girl came back to me and said suddenly, 'And what will you take with your stuffed breast, Miss?' My figure being all my own, I felt it rather hard."

"Let's get back to Heaven," said Hilda, as the laughter subsided. "Franc always demoralizes us. Beatrice, what is your opinion?"

"It will be always morning there," said Beatrice slowly, after one of her characteristic pauses. "At least, one will feel as one does in the morning after a good night—as if everything wer possible, and one wanted to be happy. I don' even want that at night."

"It will be something beyond comprehension, said Winnie, who declined scriptural problems the only escape from disbelief. It is noticeabl that the two most irreligious members of th society were Winnie, whose father was a clergy man, and B.A., who had been brought up in a strictly churchgoing family.

"It will be simply going to sleep," said Flair.

"I wonder if we have our Heaven on earth?" mused Hilda, turning her head with one of her sudden lovely movements and striking her company dumb with appreciation of her profile. "I am certain that we have our Hell!"

"Oh, we have our Hell," said Winnie drily. "I never heard of anyone having their Heaven, though. All pleasure has a sting in it—all *our* pleasure, anyhow."

"A great orchestra giving a perfect performance of certain music gives me a foretaste, anyhow," Franc admitted. "But I can't talk about it."

"No, and you show your enjoyment by crying! Most people do when they declare themselves perfectly happy. Do you call that Heaven?" Winnie's quick laugh was a little scornful.

"I like crying in that way," said Alma. "I enjoy the thing all the more."

"Well, you won't get it in Heaven," said Winnie. "So don't you think it, dear. They won't even let you carry a pocket-handkerchief in the pocket under your wing. You are not supposed to need it."

"Nonsense!" said Alma, opening her big eyes wider. "If I can't cry, I shan't play!"

"And besides, you might have a cold," remarked Beatrice gravely. "I know just how an angel sneezes: it is a little, soft sound, like a humming-bee."

"Franc's and Hilda's susceptibilities are being hurt," said Flair, uncrossing her knees because R. L. had intimated that he wished to jump up. Winnie, who was sitting next to her, leaned over and rubbed his head, remarking, "Poor pussums!" sardonically, and Flair instinctively interposed her hand to protect the big, blunt muzzle.

"Do let him alone, Winnie," she said fretfully. "He's not well, I think; he never wants to be nursed if he is." Flair's temper was only touchy with regard to R. L. If the other girls wanted to tease her, they treated him with mild

disrespect, and watched Flair turned to bay with open amusement.

"He likes it," said Winnie mischievously. "I never knew the male animal that did not! What were we talking about? Oh, Heaven! I don't like your view, Flair. It's cold, and impersonal."

"Nor I," chimed in Alma. "I want people—I want all sorts of people whose society I ought not to enjoy on earth! Surely, in another world one will have one's innings!" The pupils of her eyes enlarged themselves, and she saw some one whom her friends did not see, filling a private heaven of her own. It would be an illegitimate heaven, under the rose, or it would hardly be Alma's. "The worst of it will be," she confessed with a sigh, "that everything will be allowed and acknowledged, and human nature is so constituted that it loves forbidden fruit."

Winnie's hazel eyes looked at her sympathetically across the room.

"What nonsense!" said Flair scornfully. "You wouldn't bother over it, anyway, if you were asleep. Who wants society when they are unconscious?"

Winnie's and Alma's eyes met again, and flashed a sudden amusement.

"One might——" began Alma.

Winnie laughed. "One certainly might——" she began in her turn.

"Are you so tired, Flair?" Hilda put in with a gentleness that was almost hurried.

"I live through the day in order to go to bed at night," said Flair philosophically. "The days are duties, and the nights indulgences or rewards. Life is just the same, on a larger scale. We are all living through it in order that we may have leave to die. Isn't that so?"

"True for you, Flair!" Magda spoke bitterly. Beatrice had been watching her from her corner,

and thought that it was a cloudy day for April's Lady; but the sunshine had not broken up the clouds as usual, and she wondered. Magda had not spoken of the dissolution at the office as yet. "I shall be glad when it's all over," she said. "Won't you, Hilda?"

"I'm very strong," said Hilda simply; and it was true. Her physique was considerably better than most of the others, but had it not been so she would have broken down long since, for she added an impossible home life to her working day. Hilda was waiting—she did not know for what; but the vitality in her was its own promise of fulfilment, and she would not surrender life until she had at least sucked some sweetness from it.

"It has occurred to me," said Beatrice, and her voice sounded awe, "that there will be a Day of Judgment before Heaven."

"In my opinion there will be no Day of Judgment to speak of," said B.A. bluntly. "We shall all be so busy asking questions that the Almighty will have all He can do to answer them. I am looking forward to it myself as the one thing that makes life bearable: there will be an explanation of so much that seems purposeless and intolerable now. I want that explanation badly."

"Amongst other things, I should like an explanation of Nous Autres," said Winnie drily.

"Evolution will give you that. Where the hardship seems to me to come in is that we were looked after as sharply as the last generation, up to a certain age, when we were turned out to sink or swim, handicapped by the very theory of men and women's relation to each other which had been taught to us. Franc and Flair and Winnie will all bear me out, and so will Magda. It says much for the modern woman that she is

as nice as she is, considering the bewildering experiences of her life. Don't you agree with me, Flair?"

"I don't believe in negative virtue," said Flair bluntly. "The woman who keeps herself pure by steering scrupulously clear of temptation, is a prudent person at best—a coward at worst. She is colourless and unsympathetic, and inevitably uncharitable. It is those who have faced temptation—who have even fallen, and struggled to rise again—who are good. There is no such thing as a good man or woman who has never had a chance to be bad. They are simply unproven, and hold their diploma by fraud. Give me the fighting angel!"

"That's me!" said Magda, promptly and unexpectedly. "I am going off now to carry out Flair's ideal in the most literal sense, and fight with a large, hot crowd at the Westminster Baths."

"Report?" said Flair idly, as the Art Editor looked to see that the fountain pen was in its place, and ruffled the notebook leaves wherein she would take both an outline of the proceedings in shorthand, and one of the actual scene in a few rough strokes to refresh a tenacious memory.

"Yes. There's a Ladies' Swimming Competition on to-night—three or four clubs—and it's rather an important event in women's sports. I told them I would take the report, but I did not see going down until late, as all I want is the finals." Her face altered unconsciously, for "they" to Magda simply meant that she had, as usual, thrown herself into the breach to take a minor worry off the mind of one man. It was not, rightly speaking, her work, but the Editor was short of reporters, and she had volunteered. It meant exactly three hours' extra work after

her day was done, intense heat and tire, and an expression of relief in one pair of masculine eyes before which she unconsciously martyred herself.

To every one's surprise, Magda's most of all, Flair dragged her lazy body out of the hammock chair. "If you can wait five minutes while I put on a hat," she said, "I'll come with you. I can go in on your pass, I suppose, and I'll do it for my L.C. (London Correspondence). Will some of you lend a hand and get the chairs up to my rooms again? I am sorry to turn you all out so early." If it were possible to suspect Flair of virtue, one might attribute her sudden energy to some intuitive feminine sense that told her Magda would be better off for a companion just now. But it is just as possible that she merely pleased herself.

As it was half-past nine, they were not sorry to go. Five minutes later the room with the packing-cases was dark and silent, only a flake or two of cigarette ash on the floor telling of the vitality lately gathered there. And out into the dark spring night went two women, across the roaring Strand where the noise of pleasure had succeeded that of work, down the steep incline of Villiers Street, into the hot gulf of the Underground Railway, to report on the stronger physique and modern athletics of their more fortunate sisters. It was a great night for the Ladies' Swimming Clubs, and a long struggle in the Water Polo Match. Flair and Magda did not get home until midnight, and R. L., very cross, got out of the central position he had taken on Flair's bed, and lay down on her feet in lieu of a hot-water bottle.

CHAPTER IV

"None worship her—but some, I fancy, love her:
Cynics, to boot!—I know the children run
Seeing her come, for naught that I discover
Save that she brings the Summer and the sun!"

AUSTIN DOBSON.

FRANC PEYTON'S number was 312 in His Majesty's Telegraph Extension Department, lately established in Cheapside for the connexion of small hamlets hitherto unenlightened by telegraph communication with larger centres. She was represented to Government—if they could have been made aware of her existence—by a unit drawing twenty-eight shillings a week, after having been in their employ for some ten years; and she was pigeon-holed for exchange of six months of country service on account of health, pending a transfer to the Central Telegraph Office in St. Martin's-le-Grand.

Franc herself found her life settled in a groove with certain stationary affections and shifting interests, like a little river running between narrow banks, and seeing at a farther distance towns and landscapes. The banks were always the same, and depended upon the river for their flowers and green grass, and all the beauties of life; but the cities and landscapes vanished and varied as the river flowed on, going outwards to the sea.

Round about the quadruplex set, at the table where she spent on an average eight hours of her day, were rows of pallid faces, some of which from near association were quite familiar, and had personalities attached; while others, fading away in distance, were mere types of the London worker, young men and girls with livid skins like plants reared away from sun and fresh air, and

minds which learned to jog with the Morse—dot dash, dash dot dot dot, dash dot dash dot—all day long. The men mostly developed a Cockney accent, and the girls a questionable taste in blouses. It became an unconscious impression in Franc's mind, for being healthy and sane, her vitality rose superior to inherited instinct and she accepted the accents and the blouses as mere details in the scenic background of life—as little to be objected to as Alma found the whitewashed walls behind the glitter of the House. Some few of the girls immediately surrounding Franc knew and consequently loved her; they told her what "*He* had said, and so *I* said," etc., and they asked her out to tea at other Suburbs than the one where she lived, and stated a reprimand from the Supervisor as a common grievance. For the Supervisor walks to and fro, to and fro, all the weary day between the lines of clerks in His Majesty's Telegraph Extension Department, and checks the girls when they flag, or fling a scrap of human conversation to a neighbour when engaged on His Majesty's business; for which supervision they draw better pay and gain much jealousy, and so all girl clerks look forward to being Supervisors and hated in their turn, and hope for the early death of those who block the way to the position.

Franc was on a small hamlet near a racing centre about nine months before the first meeting of Nous Autres recorded here, and thoroughly sick of sending through messages in cipher and otherwise, all relating to the noble sport. Now and then a bubble of wit from the general public enlightened the monotony—as, for instance, when a medical student telegraphed through to a friend in this unknown spot that he had mastered his exam.—"Sorrows ended, labour vanquished, I have passed!" But as a rule it was monotonous

enough to breed the devil's own mischief. Franc sat with her hands in her lap at times, and waited for the summons to take a message; or else she chaffed the girl next to her, who was engaged to a man in St. Martin's-le-Grand, and giggled so easily that it was no fun to upset her gravity. Sometimes, when work was slacker, she would have two circuits to look after; and this she preferred, for she was a skilled telegraphist, and it irked her to waste her time; but on an average the work of the extension had not the tensity of that in the larger telegraph department—in particular the Met., where the girls sit close, shoulder to shoulder, and are so hard pressed that at times they can hardly read the Offices of Origin in the confusion of sounds between their neighbours' sounder and their own. Franc had no desire to be one of that overburdened, understaffed department; but there is a happy medium, and the extension was certainly slow. Once it was so dull that Franc always declared that it drove her to a fracas with the head of a department, who suddenly and with dignity became aware of her existence, and designated her as "pert" in a marginal note, after having to apologize for impugning her veracity on a question of a non-delivery; and Franc was nicknamed "Miss Pert." by the whole laughing division for a week. Then things settled down again to the old monotony, and the grind of dot dash, dash dot dot dot, dash dot dash dot, went on as before.

It is very cold in March at six o'clock in the morning. If a woman, bred delicately, has to rise at that hour, light the kitchen fire, feed herself and an invalid mother, set all in order for the day in the suburban home she is leaving, and catch the 7.20 to the City and her work, she will find that her working hours run into some sixteen all told, for she has her "woman's day" to finish

when she comes back after her "man's day" at the office. The strain told upon Franc Peyton, and is one explanation of what followed, though it did not matter to anybody but Franc in its final result, and she went on with her life just exactly as if she were the automatic machine expected by Government, and no human interest had ever threatened to disturb her perfect organization. Frequent attacks of neuralgia and indigestion began to warn her that woman is merely mortal —though, to official minds, an operator on the "quad" is as near as may be to an automaton, and should only be moved by putting pennies in the slot—i.e. the weekly wage. A breakdown is the chief dread in the minds of Nous Autres, and Franc, driven by her doctor's warnings, set her wits to work and arranged for six months' exchange with a girl who wanted to see what London work was like. Franc did not even know her personally, and the mutual obligation was contrived by a clerk at the "check" table where the telegrams are distributed for transmission through the tubes. It was an instance of Franc's popularity that no sooner did it become known that her health demanded a change to provincial work, than the news acted like a beacon, and offers of assistance and suggestions of how it might be managed poured in on her from a dozen different groups. Franc was as grateful for the kindheartedness (which she had drawn out without knowing, as the sun draws out the scent from the flowers) as she was for the assistance she really received; and pending her transference in a month's time, she endured the irritating succession of ailments to which her weakened body made her a prey, feeling at least refreshed in mind.

She had been fidgeting through a bleak morning, after the usual routine of housework and the

rush for the train, and was thinking of her mother's health and her own, and sitting in a despondent bunch in consequence, when the bell rang. The future did not bear contemplation if Franc were to continue sane and sufficiently healthy for eight hours a day work, and she welcomed the distraction. She was on the A side of the quad, which is always the best, but it was a tiresome message, and the clerk at the other end had to repeat, which he did with exasperated side-notes—"Can't you hear?" "Have you got that?"—until Franc jumped to the conclusion that she was being irritated on purpose, and her blood boiled in consequence. There is hardly any limit to the fret and annoyance that a wilfully bad operator can give to the victim receiving a message. Franc was as skilled a telegraphist as any in St. Martin's-le-Grand, and was not inclined to turn her cheek to the smiter. To the unknown clerk's "Have you got that?" she retorted, "Yes, and no thanks to you!" Whereupon, having passed on an enigmatic message carrying its thousands of pounds of racing debts, she became aware that her late adversary was still speaking on the sounder.

"I say, are you the girl who has been on this wire all the week?"

Franc was just so tired of slack business that she was glad to break the rule and use the telegraph for private conversation—glad of any diversion that the Supervisor would stop if she heard. It is very nearly irresistible for the human machines at either end of the wires to use the connecting-link for personal intercourse; for which reason no rule is more strict than that the wires shall not be used for anything but the work of the Government, and the girls are fined according to ordinary telegram rates if they are caught—a halfpenny a word. Considering that the

Supervisor can read off every letter ticked out by the sounders as she strolls up and down between the tables, the risk run is very heavy; considering also that human nature is human nature, it is one that the girls still run and will continue to run to the end of all time.

"How do you know that I am a girl?" Franc demanded, in reply to the question asked her.

"Because you are so precious slow! No, I don't mean that! I say, stop and talk to me a little."

"You will kindly keep a civil tongue in your head, then," tapped Franc sharply.

"I know—it was awfully rude, but you made me repeat three times. I say, what is your name?"

"Sally!" said Franc promptly. "What is yours?"

"Dick!"

"Thank you. Good morning!" It was a temptation to add "A.A.R.," which means "Go to the devil!" and though an accepted code throughout the Post Office, is strictly unofficial.

"I say, wait a minute!" (Franc was beginning to endow Dick with a personality through the medium of "I say.") "I wonder if I shall ever see you!"

"Nothing more likely. I am arranging an exchange for provincial work."

"What luck! Do you think you will come here?"

"I don't know——" ("Yes, Miss Smith, I was just asking the operator to go a little more slowly. The messages are mostly in cipher and I cannot take them.")

Fortunately the Supervisor had only heard the last three words of the conversation, and passed on, but Franc rang off abruptly.

Dick began again in the afternoon, however.

Franc hurried off to her lunch about eleven, for the girls were fed in batches from that hour to 2-30. and those operators who were at work at eight were ready for their meal before noon. No clerk was allowed to leave the building for food, for fear of their circulating information gained over the wires, so the girls came down from the office through the endless passages to the swing glass-doors that shut off the refreshment-room from the rest of the building. In the busy kitchens, at least, law and ordor reigned, but the dining-room itself was less attractive, and the air of the place resembled a beanfeast under unauspicious circumstances. At one end were the tables of the mighty, where the Supervisors fed off properly-laid cloths garnished with vases of flowers, and waited on by real servants in real caps and aprons. But between the Supervisor and the Clerk there was a great gulf, exemplified in this case by the mere getting of dinner. A female clerk entered by the same door as the Supervisors, but passed on to the ticket office, where she bought a ticket for the dish she chose from a written menu. This she presented at the counter (from behind which came Franc's query of " What with your stuffed breast, Miss? ") and carried her own plate of meat across to the tables at the further end of the room, which were simply spread with cloths. She found her own table cutlery and glass from a certain drawer and shelf, and carried them to her place, returning to the counter at the pudding course for the next plateful. Thus the clerks waited on themselves, and were examples of official economy. Whether or no it increased their self-respect to be treated somewhat like a Board School, did not matter; it was a more serious consideration to them, anyhow, that their time-limit off work was half an hour, and that the taking tickets and getting

attended to reduced the time for actual eating to some twenty minutes, after which they must be back and on duty until finally relieved. The male clerks had their own separate room, but were no differently served, and, indeed, the bare, low-ceiled room in which they dined was even less appetizing, being underground. Their chief advantage came in the better pay, for they drew nearly double what the women did, though their work was neither more skilled nor of greater quantity than the best operators among the opposite sex. Franc had eaten her lunch without appetite on this particular day, and was back in her place at the South-Western District Hamlet table, wondering why Providence had not endowed her with the digestion of the proverbial ostrich, when the bell rang and she prepared to take a message.

"I say," began the little clicking machine, which was introducing two people to each other at a distance of some few hundred miles and that is a feat not granted to most chaperons.

"Oh, is it you?" said Franc casually. "I'm nearly asleep. I wish you wouldn't disturb my after-dinner nap."

"You can't be very busy, Sally!"

"We are nodding over the quads up here. I suppose they are nearly as slack in country offices, since they have to use up their time talking to perfect strangers to keep in practice!"

"Oh, I say, you do hit hard! Look here, I want to know if you are dark or fair?"

"Nondescript," said Franc. "My hair is red, and my eyes are pink-rimmed, and I have a turned-up nose."

"I'm sure that isn't true."

"Why?"

"Because no girl would own up if it were." (Stress of interest was quickening Dick's wits.)

"Very well, then, it's not true, and you may think of me as you like."

"Oh, I say! but how am I to know you when we do meet?"

"By the wart on my nose!" said Franc with a chuckle, and then seeing the Supervisor bearing down on her, she added "R.D.," which means "Received," and puts an end to all communication, legitimate or otherwise.

Franc's interests, both inside and outside the office, were so manifold that she forgot Dick exactly five minutes after he ceased to talk to her along the wires. She belonged to two choirs—one secular, and one in the church in the immediate neighbourhood of her home, where she sang alto and expanded her soul, for her natural taste ran to music. The units which went to make up His Majesty's Telegraph Extension Department had strangely enough preserved sufficient life and individuality to combine into societies and clubs and other associations, for the development of body and brain, despite system and routine, which was an outlet unprovided for in the regulations, and occasionally confused the authorities who came in contact with some rumour of such organizations and hardly knew how to deal with them. There was a philharmonic society belonging exclusively to the whole Extension, a book club to several of the Divisions, and various funds for mutual aid, to say nothing of subscriptions whenever any one left or was married or fell ill. And Franc was clamoured for as a member to most of them, but regarded her own popularity no more than she did the simple doing of hard duty that made up her daily life. Dick, on this occasion, was speedily put out of her mind by a call from another sounder for which she was responsible. She knew nothing of the clerk at the end of this particular wire, and went on taking

messages monotonously until tea-time, the forefinger of one hand held over the key ready to give the "R.D." or to demand an "R.Q.," the other hand writing letter by letter as she listened to the message. She had made a poor lunch, and was thankful when four o'clock brought tea, and she could rest from work for a few minutes and talk to the girl next to her. Tea was the only meal with which the clerks were served, and was given free, with such additions as they chose to supply out of their own pockets. It consisted in one thick delf cup (there was no saucer allowed) filled with a weakly beverage and two slices of bread and butter which had been chopped off by machinery as fast as the kitchen could prepare them for the four or five hundred men and women for whom it was catering. The cups came around on trays such as are used at railway stations, and then followed the "outside orders" of cake, or buns, or jam. Most of the girls bought penny pots, and spread the thick slices with sticky redness, and the men had stolid bunstuffs, and sometimes even fruit. Franc ate her bread and butter plain, her only extravagance being a second cup of tea, and the girl next her, to whom she turned for a minute's conversation, promptly asked her to share some unwholesome-looking cake, and added a request that she would help her in a private concert given in a part of London almost inaccessible to Franc, whose good nature had ofttimes to bear the strain of deferred meals and late hours in order to oblige her friends.

"Oh, my dear, I don't think I can!" she protested in some distress. "I like to get home to my mother early, you see."

"Oh, do, Miss Peyton! You sang for Miss Seaton last month, and I hear you simply made the success of the evening." She offered the

compliment with a jammy mouth, but it was quite genuine.

"I wish I had not, then," said poor Franc comically. "Look here, if I come down, will you put me early in the programme and let me leave before 9.30? I may be home by midnight that way."

"I will, on my word of honour. And, Miss Peyton, will you play some of the accompaniments?"

"Oh, use me for anything you like when you've got me!" said Franc desperately. Then, with a sigh, "Some people are born to play accompaniments!".

The unusual protest against Fate was wrung from her by the weariness of ill-health, for as a rule she did not repine. She had learned the lesson preached by Flair Chaldecott's worshipped author—"Gentleness and cheerfulness, these come before all morality: they are the perfect duties." It was in her tired, drawn face as she swung out of the office day after day and trudged along the City, working southwards through monotonous stages of omnibus, and train, and tram. The beginning and ending of Franc's day for eight months of her year was the fire. The morning she mechanically connected with lighting it—sometimes with laying it; at night she came in from the City to find both her mother and the fire rather low in their vitality as a general rule, and proceeded to build them both up. The attack with the poker, and the judicious expenditure of coals, was hardly more efficacious than her cheery "Well, mother dear? I'm so glad to get home!" was to the invalid with the gracious face whom the rest of Nous Autres always connected with a sofa, a white fluffy shawl, and a presence in which one always spoke gently.

Franc's transference to the country, though she

knew it imperative, was a time of anxiety to her, both on account of her mother and the fact that she had practically to keep up two establishments. Mrs. Peyton had a pittance which was called a pension by the wealthy institution in which her husband had worked, and Franc had helped to eke it out ever since she left off school-work and began her career as a Government clerk. It is difficult to divide twenty-eight shillings so that it will support two people, but much can be done if you live in one room over a stationer's shop in a small country town, and deny yourself most things except soap and water. Nous Autres may not be godly, but they are invariably cleanly, even though, as Flair said, they hardly have time to wash properly. There was nothing in Franc's existence to mark her as different to the young ladies who served behind other counters than that sacred to the Post Office, except, perhaps, the worn books that lay on her window-sill and covered the one little table where she spread her own meals. R. L. Stevenson's "Christmas Sermon"—for which she has already stood as an example—Dickens' "Christmas Books," Ruskin's "Time and Tide," "The Rubaiyat," and one or two of the best novels of the day that had reached the sixpenny edition—that was all, if one did not count a Bible. I have never met any community so devoted to their Bibles, as Nous Autres, or so utterly indifferent to their Prayer Books. Franc did not, personally, draw any distinction between herself and her neighbours, though she did not find that she could make even acquaintances of them as she had of the girls in the London Extension. It was a lonely life in consequence, for she was the only one of Nous Autres in that immediate neighbourhood, and the girls in the stationer's shop, where the Post Office had set up their own counter with

Franc behind it, had alien interests. At the end of a long, tiring day she would hear them say with cross politeness, "Excuse me, Miss Jones, dear!" as they pushed past each other; and it always made her laugh. The "young lady" to whom the excuse was addressed did not laugh, and therein lay the barrier between them, for a different sense of humour betrays racial separation, and fixes a great gulf between one class and another.

It had slipped Franc's mind, when she left London, that she was going to the big town of the district in which Dick's small connexion was, though she had actually told him of her appointment one day in a fit of desperation when he had been more than usually pressing in his overtures of friendship, and had said, "I say!" to the end of Franc's endurance.

"I am going to X—— next week, and there will be another girl here to listen to your nonsense and good riddance to bad rubbish for me!" Franc had said, allowing discourtesy the rein in her character of Sally. Dick had taken the information with unusuual taciturnity. He had merely said "Oh!—which Office?—There are two!" To which Franc had deigned no answer but "R.D.," and had dismissed Dick from her existence. She had been a week in her new berth with no one to speak to, and only her mother's letters, or her friends', to make her homesick, when one evening a bashful young man walked into the stationer's shop, and over to Franc's counter. It was tea-time, and this chance customer was unwelcome, for Franc had hoped to dive into the little parlour behind the shop, and—in the language of Nous Autres—borrow a cup of tea from her good-natured landlady. She came forward rather wearily and faced the young man, who was smiling sheepishly and seemed uncertain what he

wanted. He was rather a tow-haired young man to Franc's inspection, and his provincial clothes made him appear more of a hobbledehoy than he really was. In any guise he did not attract Franc.

"Stamps?" she suggested politely from behind the counter.

"No, I've just come from counting 'em," he said, and the uneasy smile widened. "We have about seven sheets at Little X——! I'm in the Post Office too."

He seemed to think that this conveyed sufficient reason for his presence at an Office in the larger town. Franc began to wonder if a certificate of lunacy were all the examination needed to pass into the Offices in this part of the world, when he spoke again.

"Oh, I say, are you Sally?"

For a minute Franc could not recover the connexion of a fortnight ago across the telegraph wires, and wondered what he meant. When she remembered, she had presence of mind enough left to take advantage of her alias.

"No, my name is Franc Peyton," she said with distant politeness. "Perhaps it was one of those —young ladies in the shop whom you wanted?" She glanced in the direction of the busy shop-girls behind the legitimate stationery counters. But Dick had the quality of persistence, and though slow, his brain was tenacious.

"No, that won't do!" he said, and his expression had the sense of a wink. "I've inquired at all the Offices for a young lady who came down from the Extension from London, and you are the only one. I've run you to earth at last. I suppose it was only your kid to tell me your name was Sally?" he added simply.

Franc, convicted, smiled an apology, and did not wince at the slang. There was no intention of offence in Dick, nor was he of a very different

grade to the men whom Franc associated with—and avoided—in London. What he wanted was to follow up an acquaintance which had piqued his curiosity, and he found nothing in Franc to damp his courage. In a vague fashion he felt her a shade more to his liking than the other girls in a like position whom he had met, though he could not have put it into words. Franc was very shabby just then (you cannot squeeze clothes as well as two livings out of twenty-eight shillings a week), and beyond the fact that she did not overdress her hair, or wear strings of beads round a bare neck, there was nothing to divide her from the other girls in the shop save her hands. Next to Magda she had the prettiest hands of all Nous Autres, and a woman's hands are the sign of breeding that lingers longest, and carries most conviction. Perhaps Dick did not observe such details, but he knew in his honest soul that she differed in some sort to most of his acquaintance, and he managed to explain his desire to improve their friendship.

"Look here, will you come out with me on Sunday?" he said. "I'll come over and we'll go for a walk, or you could meet me a little way out of the town, and we'd have tea somewhere and come back to church. I always go to church in the evening instead of the morning because it's less crowded."

Now Sunday was Franc's worst day, because she had not even work to fill the long, silent hours, and there was no one at all to speak to. Had she faced herself with the problem of "walking out" with a young man known only to her across the telegraph wires, she must have gently declined and stopped the whole thing at once. But the boy—he was little more—was merely well-meaning and wanting in all finer knowledge of life, and the trap of church-going snared Franc's feet

as innocently as Dick's own. The church has chaperoned more flirtations than any other respectable excuse for drawing men and maidens together, and where the religion is genuine the results seem to be even more serious. Franc did not quite know in what rash moment she agreed to Dick's plan, but the next Sunday saw her desperate young feet walking out from the solitude of the closed streets away into the Spring country where fitful April and rustic love awaited her together.

Dick was of the silent order of wooers—a bucolic shyness that is content to walk stolidly arm in arm with the object of its affection, neither exchanging a word, and so his drawbacks were less manifest than if he had had the town assurance to talk. When he had got over a little of his diffidence, however, he confided most of his bald history to Franc, and with her sad knowledge of youths in general she found the record refreshingly harmless. He was the son of a small provincial tradesman who had put his son into the Post Office as equivalent to a clerkship, and consequently an advance in gentility. Dick had done ponderously well at school, and had plodded creditably through his exams. He really meant to rise in his station in life and to help his parents, and, like all his class, he looked forward to an early marriage as a matter of course, long before he could afford to keep a wife. For the rest he was an affectionate fellow with rough, tow-coloured hair and ill-cut clothes, and he sang in the church choir sometimes—another fatal by-path to Franc's favour.

She did not write and tell either her mother or Nous Autres of this new acquaintance; perhaps even at a distance she felt that strange influence that thrust her out into the desert as one of them, a creature for ever set apart from its own kind—

and she craved for the warm human bliss of companionship, and a dream fireside, however homely.

"'Twas but her womanhood,
With all its great capacities for bliss!"

Franc Peyton had the impulse of all warm-hearted women to take the love offered her wherever and however she found it, with the added and more dangerous excuse of making the best of her life and accepting that sphere in which she found herself.

"He is not a gentleman," she said to herself in self-defence as the months went on and made it impossible to shut her eyes to the point whither they were drifting—"but he is a good fellow, and we think alike and feel alike. And what use is it for me to hanker after the kind of position that mother had, when I have to live amongst people like Dick and never mix with any one else? I have no social status, and if I marry I had better take a good man than wait for the chance of some one with more questionable principles and greater polish."

But she knew in her piteous heart that she was denying her birthright, and trying to disprove herself.

It was in church that Dick jarred least, and came nearest to her in every way. His religion was of a very simple quality, but it was the one subject on which he had thought and read a little, and, in spite of a provincial accent and commonplace words, he managed to express the best part of himself to Franc, who, like all generous natures, glowed into enthusiasm in catching eagerly at the least reason for appreciation, and raised poor Dick to a pedestal where he posed oddly even in imagination. When they stood side by side in the choir-stalls and held the same hymn-book, and felt their voices mingle and sup-

port each other, Franc found no implacable barrier to prevent her looking steadily to a long life with this same man beside her, despite his limitations. Dick did not wear his dreadful ill-cut black coat on Sunday either, or the round hat that seemed to press out his ears to more than their usual evidence; when they went for a Sunday "tramp" it was an excuse for him to appear in harmless tweed—a short jacket and knickerbockers which the vicar excused beneath the surplice—and with a cap on his rough, fair head, he cut rather an admirable figure of urban strength.

And then at last there came a moonlight night, as there does in all women's lives, when the organist had played a voluntary of Thomé's (what does the French master of yearning and passion want with stealing his melodies among the abstract emotions of a congregation? Yet they *will* play him in sacred buildings!) and the anthem had been, "Oh, for the wings of a dove!" one unusually rich boy's voice rising and falling until Franc struggled with the tears gathering in her eyes, and felt Dick's large, rough hand close over her own with what seemed to her an inspiration of sympathy. As a matter of fact, they were merely two young people with a musical taste which made their emotions dangerously near the surface; but by and by, when they were walking home through the echoing streets of the broad old market town, Dick stopped suddenly and stammered with his own impulse:

"Franc, dear, I want you to promise to be my wife!" he said as suddenly as the words had overtaken him.

Then there was the pause before the answering impulse in the woman's heart. But Nous Autres were very far away, and the invalid mother with the gracious, refined face, and there was only the

human nearness and dearness of Dick's broad shoulders, and the hand that was nervously clasping her arm under the old cloak she wore. She could not see the coarse mould of the features in the shade of his tilted cap, and perhaps some of the church music lingered still in his voice to idealize it, for she heard no commonness there. They were just man and woman for the nonce—and if they could have remained at the height of a supreme moment of their lives, lesser things would not have mattered at all. But there is a to-morrow even after a moonlight night, when we come back to earth, and Franc forgot it.

And so she said "Yes," and felt very strangely tired and quiet that night when she went up to her little bed-sitting-room and sat down to realize that her future was out of her own hands at last —in the strange, unknown keeping of a man whom she had only met six months since, and who might be either gentle or rough—but she could not tell, and had trusted to fortune.

Franc had gone to provincial duty in April; she left in the following September, and went back to the Extension to wait for the move into St. Martin's-le-Grand, which she expected later on. She had all the summer months in which to wander about the lanes with Dick, and idealize the moonlight and the wild-rose hedges in her own womanhood, while the man represented a peg on which to hang ownerless affections. In after years that particular country town and its neighbourhood was always coloured for Franc by the period of her life spent there, for it is a pitiful fact that we can only see the beautiful earth through our own little mental mood. The sun will shine in a million different ways for a million different people, but the mere fact that the sun is shining, however gloriously, will not lighten the heart with a new grief in it. To

Franc those hedges were always a memory to wince under, and the wild roses had more thorns than petals. Yet she thought at the time that she was happy, and when the day of her departure actually came, and Dick saw her off at the station in the abominable black coat and round hat which he always wore on serious occasions, she cried a little and attributed it to him. Perhaps she cried over herself, and a vague pain already menacing her from the future; but even as he stood there leaning his elbows on the carriage-door and thrusting his head into the compartment, some shock of contrast to the well-known faces to which she was going back seemed to touch her like a cold wind.

"Give my love to Mother," said Dick facetiously, "and tell her I'm coming to make her acquaintance the very first time I get a day out."

It was rather a favourite joke of his to speak of Mrs. Peyton as "Mother," which Franc had carefully ignored even to herself, for fear of feeling it a liberty. It jarred now, and her smile was a little more constrained than usual.

"Write to me, won't you, dear old boy?" she said gently; and Dick promised, adding that she would soon get tired of seeing his fist, he should write so often. And then the train went off, and Franc heaved a sigh, which she called regret, but which sounded like relief.

She had not done more than hint of her engagement to her mother, preferring to explain the drawbacks about which she was perfectly honest. "I have to live amongst such people—it is better to accept fate and make myself one of them," she said steadily, and without the least snobbishness, for a glance at Dick relegated him to an undeniable class even in the eyes of the .naritable. And for all her unpretentious clothes and tired face, Franc bore another stamp quite

as plainly. It had seemed easy, in the country, to state her reasons for marrying this type of young man, and she was proportionately surprised when she found herself explaining them rather hotly to her gentle mother, who accepted the position with such perfect courtesy and kindness that Franc suffered an unexpected pang.

"Oh, Mother, dear, it won't be any different," she said in protest of she knew not what. "We can all live together—Dick understands that; and you will only feel that you have got a big son. At least——"

She looked round the familiar homely room and faltered. There was absolutely nothing of value in it; even the water-colour drawings on the walls had been given by Magda, and were her own work. But on the invalid couch by the little fire which Franc had kept alight for so many weary years, lay a woman with a face alien to Dick's world, a fleecy white shawl wrapped around her shoulders, and one hand softly stroking the tabby cat who was lying on her knees.

"Yes, dear?" said Mrs. Peyton brightly. "And when am I to see Dick?"

Then it blazed over Franc that she did not desire her mother to see Dick—that the meeting she had steadily planned was a horrible incongruity, not because they were any less poor than Dick, or that he would find an atmosphere unknown to him in the little room; but because she would not have asked any of the tradesmen's boys, or the shopkeepers round about, to come and see her mother, and because—she *had* asked Dick. And Dick was to be her husband in the future. She turned mechanically to the fire, as to a healthful duty, with the shadow of defeat fallen upon her face.

The first of Nous Autres whom she met after her return to London was Hilda Romaine. They

met unexpectedly in the Strand, and Franc had just time to admire the swing of Hilda's advance before she saw who it was. The tall young body and the grave Greek face were upon her even as each recognized the other, and Hilda shook hands warmly.

"Why, old girl, I didn't know you were back! You never told us," she said reproachfully. "Have you seen any of the others?"

"No, I've been devoting myself to Mother since I returned," Franc explained with growing difficulty. Every line of Hilda's beauty seemed somehow to make the vision of a tow-headed young man at a carriage window more of a fading vision, with something of the nightmare about it. She felt, indeed, as if the whole incident of Dick and her engagement had been engendered by a bad attack of indigestion, and she began to be desperate.

"I have some news for you," she said, with a forced brightness that struck drearily on her own ears. "I want to tell the others at our next meeting. I'm engaged"—she hardly paused before she flung the whole matter down before Hilda—"to a clerk in the Post Office. He is in the same position as myself—he is in my own station of life. You know we have always agreed that Nous Autres should not go out of their sphere!"

Hilda hardly seemed to hear the piteous little justification. "My dear, I *am* glad!" she said generously, and the blue eyes warmed to the colour of violets. "What is he like? Who is he? Come in here and have tea, and tell me!"

Franc followed her into an A.B.C. with a miserable reluctance, and they sat down at a stained marble table and smelt the fumes of many teas already disposed of while awaiting their own. The atmosphere of the place somehow

reincarnated Dick; he was no longer a phantom. Franc remembered the ill-drawn outline of his face with sudden distinctness; she saw again his badly chosen clothes and the hat that pressed out his ears, even while her eyes rested on Hilda's profile—the same grave profile as the Apollo Belvedere's, only fined down to a woman's. The wide, noble beauty of it cowed her.

"He is not a gentleman, Hilda," she said in the stress of the moment's truth. "Not what we can a gentleman."

"But he is a good fellow?" suggested Hilda bravely.

"Oh, yes—after his manner. He is the son of a small tradesman."

"I can't see what one's parents matter," said Hilda, with broad comfort. It occurred to Franc that it was Hilda now who was giving the excuses. Must her relation with Dick always be excused?

"He—has not risen so much above their class," she said, with an effort. "He—is quite content with his position, I think—poor Dick! You must not expect too much, Hilda."

"You must bring him to see us. Perhaps we may stretch a point, and have him to one of our meetings," said Hilda kindly. She did not say, "What was your reason for doing this?" but as if she felt the unasked question, Franc answered it.

"Hilda, what do I matter? I am of no importance to any one save myself—Number 312 in the Telegraph Extension, a girl clerk marrying a boy clerk—who cares? When Mother isn't with me any longer (and you know it *must* come!), I shall be quite alone. And I—somehow I can't bear the loneliness any longer, Hilda. We can't afford to know nice people every day, Nous Autres. Sometimes one of the women

whom we call the "Real Girls" will keep up an acquaintance with us, and we visit them—when we happen to possess a frock in which to go. But every day and all day there is a class round us that we must meet on the level of an equal fight for bread and butter, and those are the people with whom we live. If we cut ourselves off from these, we are alone."

Hilda's lower lip took the proudest of its tender curves, and that wonderful grave glance of hers went away from Franc, across the cheap, hot tea-shop, out to the busy Strand, where many grades of life jostled each other, and all, it seemed to her, unlovely. She saw the exaggerated face of an actor drift by, the sharpened features of a newspaper man, the nondescript London type of a London clerk. No, not this, or this, or this, for her. And yet, as Franc said, if they turned from this, their womanhood must go hungry.

"Then I will be alone, dear!" she said in a low voice answering the stream of male faces beyond the cakes in the shop window as much as she answered Franc.

"I couldn't bear it!" said Franc blankly. "You don't know what it was—work all day, and no one to speak to; and the evenings with nothing to do. And I'm not Flair—I can't live on myself and not lack for company. One couldn't even go out and see things as one can in London. And then Dick came, and so—I took him."

"And therein lies one tragedy of our sex which occurs daily," said Hilda in her heart, for she saw all Franc's disaster. But aloud she spoke no word of dissuasion, and that made Franc more miserable still. She was afraid to face the rest of Nous Autres with her news, knowing that she should meet the same hearty encouragement, and feel the traitor in herself.

For as old ways and associations swung back upon her, she lost touch even with the humanity of Dick's personality. The little refinements of living with an educated person, which she had grown used to and taken as part of existence, now started out oddly in contrast to something she had always known she should have to endure. She had thought to influence Dick and alter him to her own turn of thought in a measure, and had comforted herself with the mutual taste for music even though she might not mitigate his physical drawbacks; but a grim doubt began to make her heart sink more after each letter which she received from him. He wrote the excellent hand of a clerk, and his expressions were irreproachable even if they smacked of the elementary school. But it was when Dick became facetious that their natures sprang to alien spheres, and once more Franc experienced the appalling difference in senses of humour. Dick's jokes were of the kind that sees a wit in exchanging hats on a Bank Holiday; they were not coarse because he was simply a young man emerging from the peasant class into the bourgeoisie, and by no means vicious. Nevertheless, Franc found herself totally unable to do more than ignore them with courteous silence, and began to look forward to his appearance in her home circle with actual dread.

It came at last, that touchstone of a meeting, for Dick got his holiday in December, and devoted a week of it to seeing London and Franc. His lady love was working into the late afternoons that week, and could not even meet him and pilot him to the suburb where she lived. She was obliged to drive through her day with blind misgiving, and the hope that Dick might not get to her home before her, for everything seemed to hinder her leaving the Office. There

were purple shadows under her eyes, and a hunted look on her fagged face when at last she turned in at her own gate, and, opening the door with her latch-key, learned that what she had feared had happened by a loud laugh from the sitting-room, and a familiar voice grinding her nerves afresh.

"I'll do it, Mrs. Peyton. I'm quite a lady's man, y'know—reco'nize a teapot from a warming-pan, and boil the beans to the minute! Hasn't Franc told you?"

"Franc hasn't told any tales!" Franc tried to say gaily from the hall, as she pushed open the sitting-room door, and entered the room.

Her mother was lying in her usual place, the table drawn up beside her with the tea-things, and no change in the placid kindness of her manner. Dick had evidently been having a comic fight with the kettle, at which he was pretending to spar, and telling the spluttering spout that he wouldn't stand any of its nonsense, don't-you-know; he meant to have the tea made, or he'd make it warmer than the fire for the delinquent. Mrs. Peyton was even smiling faintly at these efforts to amuse her as Franc came forward; but in a flash the girl's eyes saw the gentle, worn face and figure as something set apart from the young man in a horrible suit of dittoes which had been specially purchased as a compliment to his London holiday. Dick's ears did not seem to need the round hat to set them out to-day, and his hair was preferable in its tow-like condition to being flattened with pomade as now. He kissed Franc noisily, and she sat down rather limply, as if the operation resembled the last straw which over-taxed the endurance of the camel.

That was a hideous tea-party, punctuated with Dick's rallying remarks (a new form of his wit) and her own heroic efforts to be cheerful and

bright against the increasing silence which threatened to overwhelm her. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Peyton did a surprising amount of the talking, and Dick had much to relate of the acquaintance and courtship, until the "I says!" tumbled out of his mouth in every sentence. "Hasn't Franc told you this? Didn't Franc explain that?" he demanded. "Oh, I say, Franc, do you remember trying to kid me about your not being Sally? That was crool of you, it was reelly!"

Had Dick always said "crool" for cruel? Had it really always been as bad as this in the lanes where the dog-roses grew? And—in church? She clung to the memory of his honest convictions, and their talk of them, as to a saving hope of grace. When he left—at last, thank God!—she followed him into the little hall in her sweet-hearted remorse, and kissed him as one asking pardon for the lack she found in him.

"Come again soon, dear!" she said. "And—and we will go about together. Mother is tired to-night, or I would ask you to stay to supper. Good-night, Dick! I'm sorry I have been so dull."

She watched him go out into the quiet suburban night, and felt as if a greater loneliness took hold upon her after his departure; yet it seemed an old pain now, a part of her life which must have been accepted by her, anyway.

There were not many things in Franc Peyton's life which it made her feel mean to remember. But the time which Dick spent in town had a furtive humour about it in her memory for all her life. She made no settled plan of campaign, but she asked Dick to call for her at the Office, and contrived to introduce him to the girl who sat next but one to her in her division. This girl was pretty in spite of the universal taste in blouses;

she had a well-coloured face that Dick could understand, and a style of badinage that matched his own. Franc felt herself Machiavellian as she threw them more and more together, herself acting third; but the instinct of self-preservation rises above morality. Dick's twenty-three years made him susceptible, but he fully appreciated his obligations with regard to Franc, and struggled against his dissatisfaction, only urging her to dress her hair like pretty Nellie, and to "buck up" after the manner of that sprightly young lady, until all Franc's tired soul longed for the finale. The week Dick had meant to spend in town had, however, lengthened into a fortnight's discomfort before she ventured to suggest, as softly as only a woman in the wrong can do, that they had made a mistake.

At first Dick would not hear of it; he blustered of his own certainty with regard to his feelings, and accused Franc of being fickle—then of being jealous—then of being stuck-up (the only shaft that made her wince); but it was so obviously his self-love that was wounded, that she applied the balm of representing him to himself as only too attractive.

"And is poor Nellie to be unhappy because we can't be sensible and own that we are better friends than lovers?" she suggested, in such adroit fashion that she felt ashamed of her own facility.

It took another half-hour to soak the flattery well into Dick's mind, but it was evident that it comforted him. Only at the end, when he shook hands with Franc, and held hers in an honest grip (he had almost invited her to his and Nellie's wedding in a momentary expansiveness), did she get a glimpse of the old glamour and felt her justification.

"I was awfully fond of you, Franc," he said,

and his eyes were honest if his lips were coarse. "You know, we seemed such chums down at X——, that I fancied we should do well in a snug little home of our own. Just you and me together, and let the world go hang!"

"Yes, dear," she answered with a caught breath. "It did seem possible, didn't it? But—it wasn't for me!"

"Things have seemed different in London, haven't they?"

"Yes, things have seemed different in London," echoed Franc.

"Well, give me a kiss, just to show there's no ill-feeling, old girl," said Dick. "Nellie won't mind that, you know."

Franc put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him gently—kissed good-bye to home and homely love and the little bearings and forbearings of every day that make up married life, also; but she had really parted from them on the day that Dick first came to see her mother. She could not have altered Dick; he had certain good qualities of the peasant nature in him, but he had also the slow tenacity of the peasant brain. Franc would have gone downhill with him before she could have dragged Dick up to a higher standpoint. But downhill looks desirable to tired feet, and though she knew that what she had done was inevitable, she went straight into the sitting-room after Dick had gone, and sitting down on the floor by her mother's couch, she buried her face against the invalid's gown.

Mrs. Peyton's thin hand rested on the girl's tumbled hair in silence for a while, but when at last she spoke her voice trembled a little with the first betrayal of infinite relief that she had shown.

"Is Dick gone, dear?"

"Yes, mother—for good."

There was another pause, and then the refined

voice, that was familiar music to Franc's sensitive ears, spoke again.

"I am very glad that I need not lose my little girl after all."

Even 312 in the Telegraph Extension Department was a necessary personality here. Franc went back to the old life with its hopeless outlook, and did not even sigh when Nellie's face daily simpered into a nearer confession of bliss. Dick was one of many admirers to Nellie; but, strangely enough, the fact of his having in some sort belonged to Franc seemed to give him an exceptional value in her eyes and his suit prospered. It was not strange to Nellie, perhaps, or to the rest of the department, for it was only Franc herself who felt so plainly her own unimportance that at times she seemed merely a unit drowning in the enormous size of a world which was so full and yet so empty for her. It would have surprised her very much could she have realized the extent of her own influence in the circle immediately around her; even when she had a momentary glimpse of such truth she found it hard to believe, but she accepted it gratefully and humbly as a beautiful gift rather than the result of her own individuality.

One such glimpse came to dazzle her on the day that Nellie appeared at the office with a new ring on her finger—a small and yet rather pretentious ring, with two corals and a pearl. Franc had worn no ring when engaged to Dick, out of respect for his pocket; but Nellie liked gauds, and she was of a shrewd mind with commercial instincts inherited from her immediate forbears. She preferred to parade her appropriation—"even if it doesn't come off," she added in her own mind. "And I daresay he will let me keep the ring, anyhow."

Franc did not see the new adornment on

Nellie's plump, soiled hand, however, owing to a larger excitement. She was working in the later day that week—that is to say, she went on duty at twelve and left at eight. When she reached the office she was aware of newspaper boys running up and down Cheapside, yelling specials, almost thrusting them into the hands of those snatching at them as eagerly in their turn, of the whole live heart of the City stirred in some uncommon way. There had been a victory on the other side of the world—a victory that affected Great Britain—and it was of a nature to be splendidly popular. The Civil Departments of the Empire at home and abroad are not supposed to be of a humanity that takes a keen interest in the success of the Nation; but as a matter of fact, party feeling runs nowhere more high than in such little communities, with an existence, almost a world, of their own, such as the Telegraph Extension Department. The Stock Exchange is the best instance of this, for its patriotism it not all due to the rise and fall of the markets, and it is the first to break out and roar for Imperial reasons, and the last to be controlled. For weeks the Extension had been burning over the uncertainty on the other side of the world, which had ended in victory. Now, when Franc entered, she found the place in a ferment. Someone had brought in a paper and the news was known. In vain the Supervisors endeavoured to keep order in the groups, and to regulate the work as usual. The clerks, male and female, took advantage of the dinner hour to rush down to the refreshment-rooms, each division having its own demonstration that nothing could repress. They took the chairs and mounted a special leader to start them and to keep time; they sang the National Anthem in crashing chorus, and gave three cheers that could be heard in St. Martin's-le-Grand, where no doubt similar demon-

strations were taking place. Take men and women and bind them down to labour in artificial light and stale air for eight to ten hours of their day, you will drain the light and colour from their faces, until, to look at them, you will think them poor mechanical things with all the vitality drained away. But touch the old spark of racial pride in the meanest worker whom the relentless Nation is grinding daily to help the Empire's existence forward, and the old life and light and heat will burst out in such ringing cheers as startled Franc Peyton on her entrance to the refreshment-rooms that day.

They were waiting for her. Her own division had spared to begin until she should be there to give the note, and greeted her with an eager buzz: "Miss Peyton, we want you to start us"; and before she knew where she was, Franc was lifted on to a chair, the group closing in on her with impatience. A rush of feeling swept over her at the press of the shoulders round her, the obedient lifted faces waiting for her voice, and she recognized, even in her modesty, that she had some sort of a world here, that she was not only one with these, but had influenced them and was necessary to them. She steadied herself with an effort, and lifted the first pure, strong note across the hot, crowded room with a call like prayer—

"God!"—

(the voices caught the key and took up the National Anthem)

—"save our gracious King!"

But after the usual two verses and the pause, during which they looked at Franc to see if she were going on, she drew breath and changed the strain to the Old Doxology—

"Praise God from Whom all blessings flow"

The department had already sung the National Anthem in various keys, and "Rule Britannia" and "Soldiers of the Queen," but the unexpectedness of the Doxology struck an instant response. Those who were not singing joined in, so that most of the Extension were swelling the chorus behind Franc Peyton's clear, leading voice, and a message from those in authority which came up to know the cause of the disturbance, was answered breathlessly by the Supervisors: "We can't hold the department, sir!"

No one just then could have held the department; they pressed up round the chair where Franc still stood looking over the clustered faces and singing with all her heart and soul, as if she were one with the toiling men and women whose unlovely lives were like her own—

"Praise God from Whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, Angelic Host,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost!"

Some consolation out of the stress of daily life touched her, a sudden acknowledgment from Fate for all the cheerfully borne days, and hours, and years, during which the rights of her womanhood had been merged into mere mechanical existence. She no longer grudged her lot; she was one of a mighty Nation whose individuality, even in the unit, can never be stamped out, though she was merely Franc Peyton, 312 of His Majesty's Telegraph Extension, leading the whole department in thankful praise for national victory.

CHAPTER V

"They passed one resolution—'Your sub-committee believe
You can lighten the curse of Adam when you've lightened the curse of Eve.
But till we are built like angels, with hammer and chisel and pen
We will work for ourself and each other, for ever and ever, amen.'"

RUDYARD KIPLING.

FLAIR'S Publisher had given her a book, for which good deed he will most assuredly go to Heaven. Flair always thought of this gentleman as a favoured being who lived in an atmosphere of books—indeed, he had only to speak through a telephone and books were brought to him that he might raise humbler mortals to a pinnacle of happiness by bestowing stray volumes upon them. Her impression of him was rather confirmed by the fact that when she saw him he was generally controlling an amused smile, which she vaguely regarded as the outcome of his happy lot. That she had probably caused the amusement did not occur to Flair.

The book in question was poems, and a struggle ensued in Flair's mind between a fierce desire to devour it and a duty which took her to the Cats' Home with a basket and what remained of a miserable "stray" whom R. L. had met upon the housetops. As he had amply breakfasted with her, Flair for once was indignant with him because he seemed to consider that a portion of the stray cat's right ear would make a *bonne bouche*, and she rescued the poor thing, and fed and nursed it in her bedroom until such time as she could tenderly convey it to the nearest Home. Lost animals were Flair's chief charity; she not

only subscribed to the Homes where she took them, but she spent many pennies on fares to get the strays there, and had acquired a special basket for the cats, and a collar and chain for the dogs, after some self-denial and economy. We all have our Good Angels guiding us to practise the harder virtues. Flair's were none the less a spiritual agency because they came in furry guise, and perhaps if she never got to Heaven, she is now an honoured guest in some celestial Zoo for her unfailing charities on earth.

The cat and duty having carried the day, Flair went out and left the book on the table in the committee-room, as the one with the packing-cases was called by a stretch of courtesy; and Beatrice and Alma, happening to arrive before her return, they fell upon it and sucked in its sweetness, whereby the donor gained yet another double blessing for his gift.

The book was "Stars of the Desert," and Beatrice and Alma were sitting close together when Magda entered, drinking this in—

> "And when the hands were fallen apart,
> And the loving lips grown loath,
> A little wind from under the stars
> Came down and caressed us both."

There was no respect of persons about Magda, nor any understanding of poetry or reverence for it. Beatrice and Alma, being in Africa, naturally did not hear her enter, and she made a sarcastic remark about their indifference and went to take off her hat. Upon her return, however, they were still engrossed, and that was too much for her self-respect, so she threw the nearest cushion at them, tried to snatch the book, and awaited results.

"Sit on her head while I finish this, will you, Alma?" Beatrice said dreamily, for she was in the midst of "The Date Garden." So Alma went

to the fray, and, being nearly overpowered by the taller Magda, was reinforced by Franc; and by the time that Flair returned, it looked like a Rugby match, with Beatrice clasping the book for the leather, in their midst. Flair rescued her property, and sat upon it until she should have time to see what lay between the covers, and gradually the howls ceased and the society sat down.

"What shall we talk about to-night?" said Hilda, a little breathlessly, for she had lent her weight and strength to the losing side, and it had been a tug of war.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, talk about the leaders in to-night's papers---anything that is prose!" said Magda, whose propensities were warlike, and forced her to throw down the glove again.

"Magda doesn't understand poetry," mocked Flair. "That's what makes her so annoyed with it. Know what the French forms are, April? By Jove! if I won't write you a roundel that you will understand—it's not true French, but it's Swinburne's invention, and 'twill serve. Pass me a piece of paper, someone!"

"Now I suppose we mustn't breathe while the deathless work is shaping in Flair's brain," retorted Magda, as the fountain pen flew over an old envelope that Beatrice contributed. "What nonsense are you writing, Flair?"

"Don't look over my shoulder!" warned Flair, edging away. "Go on talking, all of you. I can write through traffic!" There was a murmured buzz, a note lower than usual out of respect for the effort, and then Flair flung the envelope across to Alma, who choked, and read it out:

"'This is Magda's Roundel—suited to her capacity!

'The making-up is very hard,
And bitter—bitter is my cup!
I must reduce by half a yard,
The making-up'

'For fear that there should be a rup-
ture, I can't leave my sub on guard;
Our office boy is but a pup;

'No single "Ad" dare I discard—
Oh, would I could go out to sup!
But that, I fear me, would retard
The making-up!'"

"I hope you understand it?" said Flair with sweet politeness to Magda, who was laughing in spite of herself.

"I like it a great deal better than those awful things you sometimes get into the Gazettes!" Magda declared brazenly. "Now, there is something comprehensible in this one—(do let me have that scribbled envelope, Alma, and I will keep it as a proof of Flair's best work!)—and besides, there is a pathetic point that appeals to me in the not being able to get out and meal. I dined at ten the other night, because of the printers being late with the pulls. All the same, I'm tired of poetry—I've had to contend with so much to-night! Let's talk prose, please—the evening papers will do as I suggested. Has anybody seen them?"

"The article in to-night's Gazette happens to deal with female labour," said Winnie. "It suits, dear!"

"B.A. says the Education Bill is rather a boon than otherwise to her line of business," remarked Franc. "I met her yesterday in an A.B.C dining sumptuously off an old meat pie and two cups of coffee. She told me she has seen more posts offered to female teachers at £120 than she has for a long time."

"What's the reason? Are men too dear?"

"Oh, the L.C.C. have got a little money in hand, and are making a show with it, I suppose. One mustn't hope that it's a permanent improvement, or a sudden awakening to female worth.

You see, you can't get over the fact that women can keep soul and body together on less than men, and so the price of labour will always differ."

"The scale might improve though," said Beatrice in her soft, trenchant tones. "At present it is, roughly speaking, one-third below for women; they might make it a quarter."

"In order that we may buy ribbons!" said Alma. "That's another point against us, and we can't alter our characteristics. I know perfectly well that if I get a good salary I shall buy things with pink and blue ribbons in them—but I should not feed myself any better than I do. We are rather unsensible, even when we have learned by experience, and the men know that and argue from it." (Alma's English was so frequently her own invention, that it was open to criticism; but her facts were uncontrovertible.)

"Women ought to be fed by the State," said Hilda positively, "and the wage fixed, with so much allowed and insisted on for food. Then there would not be a chance to sacrifice health to sentiment, and it would be political economy in the main to feed us well, in order to improve the race, to say nothing of individual effort. Women, as Alma says, don't keep a steady head enough to spend wisely. Duty seems to call one way, charity calls another, inclination calls a third. In the end the woman herself—starves."

"Hilda speaks as if we were merely in existence to improve the race," began Winnie, quietly for once, and without laughter.

"So we are, according to Nature," Hilda retorted.

"We don't come under any heading of Nature —Nous Autres!"

Then they all began to speak quickly, fighting to express their special experience, and hardly

waiting for their turn, which was against the rules.

"If you fix a wage, you let in a lot of incompetence, anyhow!"

"What we want is a sliding scale—and tests. Why shouldn't the woman who can get through as much work as a man be paid the same? Let the incompetents go to the bottom."

"That doesn't touch the feeding theory. And they argue that the man when he marries is the one to support his family, not the woman."

"Which isn't true nowadays; but anyhow, it might be limited by marriage, or adapted to need, if Government wishes to encourage increase of population! What we want is mere justice——"

"And the opening of a few more trades to us! They push women out of it in the Unions—the compositors' trade is a fair instance——"

"We shall never have Unions of our own until we learn to combine, and the experience of all ages is against that!"

"Of all ages!" Hilda's voice rang out again. "But not of this age. Look what we've done in thirty years; look how we've fought our way, without traditions, without the necessary physique, with men (who have everything in their favour) to oppose us; and we are getting on—we are getting on! Don't take Nous Autres as a fair instance—we are only the failures by which a creator learns to improve his model. Look at the next generation, and how we are training our girls to be as healthy as boys, and to live with the same liberty and not abuse it! In another twenty years, even if we only go on as fast as we have, we shall raise women who can compete with men as nearly on a level as Nature will go, and with brains to overweight the physical difference. Then they will have a right to demand equality of terms—and they will get them!"

"And--Nous Autres?" said Beatrice.

"The locusts and the bridge!" said Flair under her breath.

"The pull doesn't come in doing the work once you've got it," said Magda. "We will do or die then—and probably die!—but the real hardship is the getting it. If a boy is to earn his own living, it's a *sine qua non* that his parents and guardians train him for it, look for the berth, put him into it, and do their best to help him when there—I mean parents in the position of our own. In a lower grade I believe it is more rough-and tumble. But when it comes to us, we are simply turned out at a minute's notice—'I find you'll have to work now—things are less flourishing with me than I hoped. Go out and find employment, my dear!' As if it lay ready to our hand just round the corner!"

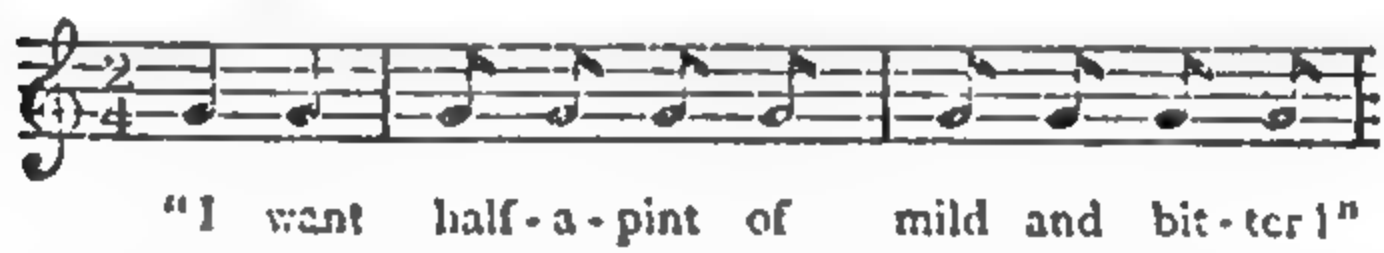
"And as if we were capable of anything, untrained and totally without experience. Funny thing, isn't it, that a woman has so much initiative? We generally bring common sense to bear on the problem, train ourselves as much as we can, and find work—somehow. Then we starve. But we generally scrape along until the works wear out. (This was Franc's contribution.) "Boys are given all the chances. Oh! if I had been a boy, I would have done something, if only with the ready-made future which would be my right!"

At this point Alma interrupted, because she wanted more claret and soda. Hilda being the nearest to the packing-case, Alma had been trying to break in on her conversation with Magda for some minutes, and to gently attract her attention by waving an empty glass; but Hilda had been too absorbed, and so Alma began to sing to herself softly. It was the oldest of "cod encores," and is introduced when some wearied

comedian has been recalled so many times that the extra verses of a topical song have all been used up.

chanted Alma, on C natural, and Franc, who unfortunately knew the trick, took it up *sotto voce* as the man-in-the-wings, on E—

Then Alma raised her voice and sang forte on G—



"Oh, go out and pay for it, then!" said Franc with a chuckle. "Here, Hilda, give Alma something more to drink, for goodness' sake!"

Hilda did as requested, but absently. Her mind was more with the question of wages than with what it would buy, though a shilling to Nous Autres means just so much bread and butter and tea as the market value will allow from it (in Alma's case at the present moment it meant a bottle of claret, of which she had drunk about a pennyworth, and wondered in her generous heart if she had mulcted any one else of their rightful share). Having supplied her wants, however, Hilda rose to break up the meeting, with a final corollary born of her thought.

"After all, what do we matter? We are a passing phase, 'The blood of the forerunners!'

in Mrs. Humphry Ward's book. There will be no chance for Nous Autres, but there will be for those who come after us in the path that we have worn. Legislature for women will be the natural outcome of work for women—it always has been, and it is inevitable. But not yet, and not for us. For us there is only to stand shoulder to shoulder, to be kind to each other individually, and to let Trade Unions and theories go until the age is ripe for them. Men cannot help us—the Real Girls cannot help us—but we can help each other."

There was a little silence as her voice ceased, and they stood looking into each other's faces. Then Franc said, unexpectedly, "Amen!" . . .

CHAPTER VI

"Pleasure with dry lips, and pain that walks by night,
All the sting and all the stain of long delight.
These were the things she knew not of—that knew not of her—
When she played at half a love, with half a lover."

—"Stage Love"—A. C. SWINBURNE.

REHEARSAL had been called for eleven o'clock in the Theatre Royal, Brixham Heath, and to reach that outer ward of the suburbs Alma had to start at half-past nine, and after a short experience of the Underground Railway, to change to an omnibus, then to a tramcar, and then to walk for ten minutes to save another penny, which she added mentally to her lunch. She arrived at the theatre rather before most of the Company, but that she did not mind, as she had met none of them before, and was curious to see what they were like. The piece was a new venture—a comic opera to be run in the Provinces

before it came to London, where it had only been put on at a *matinée*, and the forty odd souls who comprised the company would be her intimate and only associates for the space of nine months if the tour remained as at present announced.

A doorkeeper led Alma into the theatre, and after a stare into her face told her to go down a dark passage and turn to her right.

"Here, I'll show you," he said, to do which he put his arm familiarly round her waist under the excusing darkness, and leisurely proceeded in the direction he had given. Alma had been blinded by the light morning outside and the darkness beyond the stage-door, or she would not have hesitated. As it was, she made a little rush forward to extricate herself, and nearly tumbled up the steps on to the stage, with a mental note to avoid the doorkeeper during the time that the company occupied the Theatre Royal. By the time she left a town Alma had generally a black mark of avoidance against the names of half the staff, and hovered between the anxiety of giving offence to officials who could resent it on her in a hundred petty ways, and the desire to keep clear of the licence allowed even to subordinates.

On the stage she found two other girls and a man—the latter humming over the music from the disreputable script in his hand, the girls sitting close together on two chairs near the footlights, and talking in low whispers to each other. One gas lamp made the gaunt stage and backcloths a place of uncertain objects and wavering shadows, while the gulf of the house beyond was a yawning pit-mouth. It was indescribably forlorn.

"—And did he give you any presents, dear?" said one raised girl-voice, the common accent matching the pretty, ill-bred face.

"Chorus!" commented Alma, with a shudder. The most revolting detail of her profession to her was the tradition amongst the ranks of the Company that a girl should get all she could out of any man who paid her attention from the front of the house—the actors themselves were too certainly impecunious to be of any use. Alma, in her impulsive generosity, described the ladies of the Chorus as "quite nice girls, in themselves!" and chafed because she could not alter their proclivities to accept gifts from the merest stranger.

"Nothing but sweets!"

"Well, I do call that mean! He ought at least to have given you a *bracelet*!"

The young man with the script broke into a lilt of pure music, revealing a tenor voice of power and sweetness enough to make the angels weep, in spite of an unshaven face and a soiled collar.

"Molly was a milkmaid,
Heigh-o, heigh-o!
Molly was a milkmaid,
Heigh-o!"

The two chorus girls looked up and giggled; the tenor, nothing embarrassed, informed the empty house that

"Pretty little pink toes
Always go in silk hose!"

and Alma sat down and waited.

By and by more of the Chorus appeared, then the Stage-Manager, who swore because every one was not up to time, then the Conductor, who was going to run the Company through the music; but the Principals were late, with a due sense of their own importance in keeping every one waiting until tired and fagged.

"Who are we that we should have any lunch

to-day?" said a girl sitting next to Alma, with the irony of experience. "D'you know Mr. Cox?"

"No—I was never with this Crowd before," said Alma briefly.

"He is our first Comedian and very clever. He always keeps us waiting half an hour at least; it is twenty to twelve now. Oh, we *are* going to begin at last—as if we could not have sung the choruses at least! Got your score?"

"Mr. Manners has just handed me a few rags!" said Alma with dry distaste, looking at the filthy music lying on her knee, which she forebore to touch.

"It's all bits and pieces and things," said the other girl carelessly. "So is the Crowd! Do you sing chorus?"

"In the first act. I am playing 'Mrs. Hottentot' in the second. I signed for chorus and a small part."

"Oh! I am understudying lead and singing chorus too. I hope we shall dress together—some of the girls are awfully common. What is your name?"

"Alma Creagh," said Alma, suddenly conscious of the meaning of the words. For her father had been a Colonel of Foot, and had named her after the first battle in which he, as an ensign, had taken part. Alma Creagh! The daughter of a forgotten worthy with nothing but his pluck and fighting powers for her inheritance!

She was likely to prove them that morning, for the rehearsal was a bad specimen of its class. The Principals were not all present until twelve, and the Chorus was kept waiting about to practise those portions of the music where they sang two lines in the midst of a recitative by the hero or heroine. The morning dragged itself out in the dusty, stuffy place, which was yet full of draughts,

and the girls, who had worked really hard at their task, were jaded and hungry by two o'clock, before which there had been no cessation of business.

"Well, I'm going out to get some lunch, Mr. Manners," said the leading lady, slapping her music together, and rising determinedly from her chair. "It seems as if we should still be here at six to-night, and I can't sing on nothing."

"But, Miss Le Croix, we must rub it into something like shape as soon as possible," protested the conductor, angry and tired, and resenting the lady's selfishness because of his own conscientiousness in sticking to his duty.

The Chorus listened in hungry silence, longing, with what felt like empty bodices, for a release in which to fill them up with indigestible buns, or anything that would relieve the faint feeling in their ill-nourished frames. Alma, who had had an early breakfast, was beginning to see the ghost-like empty seats in the house through a dizzy haze, and under her big eyes were two dark lines like bruises. Those of the Chorus who knew Mr. Manners had brought their refreshments with them.

"Very well," said the conductor savagely, as the leading lady dragged her soiled silk skirts across the dirty stage, "then we must simply take the Chorus alone until you come back. Ladies, Act 3—opening chorus!"

The daughter of Colonel Creagh turned the page with a shaking hand, squared her shoulders, and forced her voice to the renewed effort. She would go down with her back to the wall—if only she did not feel so sick!

It was three o'clock before the girls were grudgingly released, and, starved and faint, trooped out to the nearest confectioners in that dubious neighbourhood. Alma's little worn purse

held exactly tenpence halfpenny—sixpence of which it cost her to get back to her room in Nomen Street, Victoria. She looked with anxious eyes round the uninviting shop which she had entered, and wondered what would go farthest, but she was so giddy with tire that she hardly cared. A halfpenny bun, a glass of milk, and a twopenny ham sandwich—that was her selection for four hours of hard work, and another hour and a half's journey! She was not at best a strong girl, though the Creagh pluck and endurance took her through where sounder constitutions wavered. Furthermore, she had had a bad experience of late on which to rest a strain, for she had only been home from a tour in South America and Canada for a month when she got what is technically called a "shop," and began this rehearsing for comic opera. Alma counted herself as lucky, for the foreign tour had not left her with as much money in hand as she had hoped, and she was for the moment anxious. She could no more save than her father before her, and every spendthrift tale of less scrupulous members of a company worked upon her pity and charity as a sick cat did on Flair Chaldecott's. Alma had never been on tour yet that some one in the crowd did not sponge upon her, from making demands upon the small salaries which would hardly feed herself, to borrowing her clothes—that most necessary item of an actress's stock-in-trade which they frequently ill-treated or did not return. A girl like Alma is bound to be imposed upon by the motley classes which rub shoulders in the theatrical profession; but it is possible that the wide, sweet-hearted nature gained more than it lost even by the privations its generosity incurred. There were some who were shamed into loving Alma Creagh, and who, converted to partisans, fought other mere sharks fiercely on her behalf,

with a coarser strength than was possible to Alma for herself.

The girl who had sat next to her at rehearsal was a case in point. She followed Alma to the same confectioner's, and sat at the same table, complaining that she could not afford a proper lunch. Alma would have shared the bun and the sandwiches with her, having already started each chorus for her with a truer ear, and lent her half her cloak as a shield to one of the theatre draughts. The girl—who is only worth calling Molly—looked at Alma's feverish white face, and had the grace to decline a share.

"We are about as badly off one as another," she said. "What was your last show?"

"Canada!" said Alma wearily, putting her thin hand over her great bright eyes. "We had an awful time!"

"How was that?"

"We did one-night towns, with long distances in between. It meant that you got no sleep. We were not in bed till one, and then we had to get up at five to catch the train, travelled most of the day (and you *can't* rest!) got into another town at noon, and then rehearsed! The girls used to fall asleep on their dress baskets at the stations. We never could play decently, we hadn't the heart. We were so tired. Of course, we had to pack up every night too, both at the theatre and the hotel. There was no rest anywhere!"

"No wonder you look played out!" said the other girl, in suddenly shocked tones. "This is a bad crowd for you after that sort of thing. Manners spares no one, and you ought to have had three months' rest at least."

"Yes, but I can't. I should starve!" said Alma briefly, pushing the empty milk glass aside. She still felt dead tired, but not so faint. "I think I will get home and go to bed," she said

vaguely. "I feel as if what I wanted was to sleep—and sleep—and sleep!"

Flair Chaldecott's ideal!

Molly looked her sharply in the face and rose also.

"I'll come with you part of the way," she said, and to her credit she did so, putting Alma almost tenderly into her last train, and telling her to take it easy to-morrow—the Chorus never troubled to be punctual, knowing the proclivities of the Principals.

But there was no working to-morrow for Alma. She let herself into her rooms feeling oddly light-headed, and trying to decide what she could do if she were ill—that nightmare that haunts Nous Autres. She was living alone just now, in a bed-sitting-room which cost her twelve shillings a week, everything but food included. It was impossible to communicate with her friends, and the only thing distinct to her mind was that she must go to rehearsal to-morrow—somehow. For one thing she could not afford to pay a fine; for another, the thought of perhaps losing her engagement filled her with unprecedented terror in her present overwrought state. She had five pounds in the Post Office—that was all. Five pounds between her and the streets! She pulled the pins out of her thick hair in a kind of frenzy, hoping to still the pain in her head once the weight of it were free, and shaking it about her shoulders, she took off her clothes with trembling fingers and crept in between the cool, kind sheets.

It was by that time five o'clock in the afternoon. The landlady did not take up Alma's tea, her lodger having an oil stove, and preferring to make it herself. But she usually carried a tray with a cold supper to her room between seven and eight, and she leisurely proceeded to do so this evening, not being at all disturbed at hearing nothing of

Miss Creagh all day, for she knew that the little actress was rehearsing. She almost started back with astonishment on entering the room to see Alma's tossed dark head resting on the pillow, and her unconscious face with its closed eyes.

"Pore thing! She's tired out, and won't need no food to-night!" she said, peering a little curiously at the exhausted white face. "But I'll leave the supper."

She put the tray on the table and went away, Alma moaning a little in her sleep even as she did so; nor did any one come into the room again until ten the next morning, for Alma did not rise early unless she gave her landlady notice that she had to rehearse, and should want breakfast before her usual hour.

Alma was still lying in bed when the woman entered the room, in much the same attitude as the night before; but she was muttering—scraps of comic operas and plays though the landlady did not know it—and as if the opening of the door caught her attention she half sat up in bed, fixing her feverish eyes on the intruder.

"I must go to rehearsal—I shall lose my engagement—and the advance agent has never gone on with the plots," she said pitifully. "You know he hasn't, and that is why there are no props! What am I to do for a broken mirror in the last act?" She broke into a line of shrill, sweet music that had haunted her brain since yesterday, though she had not known it—

"Pretty little pink toes
Always go in silk hose!"

"My sakes, miss, you're sick!" said the landlady in dismay, staring at the delirious eyes following her about the room. "And I'm sure *I* don't know what to do! She hasn't a friend in the world as I knows of," she muttered, turning

to the door. "And as to re'earsal, it would mean death to 'er." She went out of the room, locking the door firmly behind her, as if Alma's recovery depended solely upon being kept in one room. Then she sent round a note to the nearest doctor by one of the children, who stopped to play in the gutter, and then she set to her household tasks, secure in the fact that the patient could not get out, and that she had done her best for her in her own opinion.

At four o'clock that afternoon it chanced that Winnie Dare, on her way home to West Kensington and a dreary boarding-house, turned out of her direct road to seek comfort of a friend. She had got off work early, and hated the idea of the sordid room at the boarding-house, wherein every one ate stale bread and butter or cheap cake, and one or two young men home from the City ventured to "chaff" her as the only pretty girl in the house. Winnie called them "Brown, Jones, and Robinson," and made merry over them to Nous Autres; but in her soul she contrasted them with the man whom she called Somebody when speaking of him to Flair.

"I will go and borrow a cup of tea from Alma," said Winnie, and turned into Nomen Street.

The house was only a few yards down, and at the door she was met by the landlady with a face which looked even longer than a protruding upper lip had made it.

"Miss Creagh, miss? Yes, she's in—and I'm very glad you've come to 'er, pore thing!" she said severely, as if Winnie's appearance were only a poor apology for neglect.

"Why? What is the matter?" the girl asked, startled.

"She's very sick, miss. I've sent for the doctor, but he ain't come. I suppose pore folks

can't be attended to at once like the rich, though it's never so pressing," said the woman with a sanctimonious sniff, for Tommy had not told of his loitering on the way or the fascination of gutters, and the note should have been delivered hours ago.

"Miss Creagh ill! What is it?" Winnie asked sharply.

"I'm sure I don't know, miss, but I 'ope it's nothing catching; and if it is, she must go to the 'ospital, sorry as I shall be to turn 'er out, and me with a 'ouseful of small children and lodgers! And wanting to get up and go to re'earsal, which would 'ave bin 'er death, and of course I stopped that, miss, and locked 'er in!" she ended, with indignant virtue.

"Oh, poor Alma!" said Winne under her breath.

She almost pushed the large slovenly woman out of the way and ran upstairs, unlocking the door and entering the cheerless, hopeless sick-room. Alma had got back into bed, and was lying shivering under the bedclothes, and muttering piteously of past experiences, long weary waits, and miserable journeys, hardships "on the road," and shameful dangers behind the scenes that turned Winnie sick. In one of the burning phases of the fever she had evidently risen and flung open the window, and had then probably wandered about the room and taken a fresh chill. At any rate it was evident that she was very, very ill—and she had been there, locked into the room without nursing or attendance, for twenty-four mortal hours! The untidy, comfortless surroundings seemed to mock her pain and helplessness. It was illness without the grace of care or tenderness, illness in all its most sordid ugliness, the hard outcome of having been flung on a loveless world. Winnie's hazel eyes blazed with furious

resentment against the destiny which seemed to have been thrust upon Nous Autres, and then burned with scalding tears.

"Poor Alma! Poor little Alma!" she said brokenly, straightening the clothes, and touching the hot forehead. That Alma had fever of some kind was certain, but she was quite fearless. She laid all the clothes and wraps that she could find on the bed to force the burning heat to a perspiration if she could by such simple means, soothing Alma with her voice and touch meanwhile. Then she straightened the room, almost throwing last night's supper-tray out of it in her indignation at the landlady's indifference, and sponged the patient's lips. When she could do no more for Alma for the minute, she glanced anxiously at her watch.

"I must go round to Flair; she is the only one of us who can come," she said half aloud. "I must be in business to-morrow, and I dare not sleep here if it is something catching, nor must Magda or Beatrice; and Hilda lives too far off Flair is the nearest, and she has no office work."

She glanced reluctantly at Alma; but there was nothing for it but to leave her; so turning the key in the lock again, she went downstairs and gave her brief orders to the landlady.

"I am going to send somebody to stay the night with Miss Creagh, until we can make other arrangements," she said. "And if the doctor comes in the meantime, please let him see her, and tell us all that he says. I have locked the door again, but I shan't be gone long."

Winnie's stormy eyes and upright slender figure impressed the landlady. The girl swayed like a young beech tree moved by the wind in her anger, and towered above the fat woman as she swept out of the house. Winnie's impulses were generous either for good or for bad, and

in the cause of friendship she spared neither her money or herself; it was unheard-of extravagance to take a hansom unless it were one's birthday, or some surprising luck had befallen; but Winnie did not hesitate. She hailed the first cab she saw, thankful that her week's salary held out to pay for it so near Saturday, and drove straight to Charing Cross.

Flair was sitting in the deck-chair as Winnie came in, in her own room, for its comfortable, easy length made it her most cherished possession, and she carried it down or upstairs for the society's meetings and her own use. Winnie was breathless from climbing up many flights of stairs, but she had hardly got out her message before Flair was on her feet and looking round to collect what goods and chattels she must take with her.

"I suppose it is too late to get things in to-night," she said. "I will take my own bovril. Ten chances to one the cupboard will be empty!"

"Can you go, then, Flair?"

"Go! Of course I can go—some one must, that is evident. Has Alma a spirit stove, do you remember?"

"She has a 'Beatrice.'"

"That won't do—there may be no oil. Pack that methylated spirit and the small stove, Winnie, while I go and look out some clothes. There's the key of the cupboard—put up what you think I shall need. Remember, I must eat if I am to nurse," she added, walking off into the next room.

In five minutes she was back with a handbag ready, and Winnie had made a bundle of the portable food she found. There was no brandy, but Winnie offered to go round home by way of Nomen Street and order in anything that could be got, while Flair went straight to Alma.

A wine-merchant is more likely to send than

a grocer," she said. "Get me some ice if you can, Winnie. I wonder——"

A sudden shade of anxiety made her face pathetic. Winnie caught it, and thought it was for Alma.

"What is it, dear?" she said tenderly.

"Nothing," said Flair, swallowing breathlessly. She could not explain that she was suffering a pang, not on Alma's, but on R. L.'s account. Every time she left her rooms for a holiday it was becoming more of an effort to Flair to leave him behind, for a cat of "R. L. Stevenson's" dimensions is not property easily disposed of or conveyed to other lodgings, and so she had the gnawing anxiety of having to leave him to Mrs. Bonnet's own tender mercies, and to know that instead of her regular feeding he might often go hungry. It seemed a dreadful thing to Flair that he must think himself suddenly deserted, and that she could not explain to him that her heart was torn between him and Alma's greater necessity.

"Alma can't help herself just now," thought Flair desperately. "And R. L. can go out and steal, poor dear! I hope he will—only some one might hurt him!"

There were tears not far off her eyes, as in her too vivid imagination she saw the cat butting vainly at her doors in his usual manner, and unable to get in. If she had been able to fasten them open safely, Flair would have risked all her belongings and left the rooms, at least, at his disposal; but the fear of some mishap taking place—of R. L. getting locked in and starved (Mrs. Bonnet would never trouble over his non-appearance)—was so frightful that she carefully locked them both before leaving the house with Winnie. She saw Mrs Bonnet on her way out and explained the situation to her, asking her in

a rather shaky little voice to remember to feed R. L., who happened for once to be asleep in the kitchen.

"Oh, he'll be all right, miss!" said Mrs. Bonnet consolingly. "He's fat enough to do without a few dinners!"

Flair stooped down and kissed the flat soft head in silence. She was suffering quite out of all proportion in this sacrifice of one thing that she loved to another, partly on account of the vivid imagination which, had she lived, would probably have brought her notoriety, if not fame. Flair was never quite normal in her experiences; her agony of tenderness over the brute creation, her exquisite enjoyment of certain brief pleasures which left her unable to express it, her equally intense pain over failure, moral or mental—all may have been the heritage of the artist, but they were very uncomfortable emotions to Flair.

Fortunately her hands were too full, once she arrived at Nomen Street, to allow her much time to think of R. L. going supperless to no particular bed. The doctor came almost as soon as she had settled herself and her belongings, and being a young man in a hurry hardly waited to be shown up, but took the stairs two at a time, and knocked at Alma's door, while the landlady still panted in the rear.

"This the room? Fever, you think? Then you had better stay outside," he said curtly. "I'll see to it. I only had your note a few—— Ah!"

The door had been opened to him by a small woman with a tired face and the most horrible eyes he had ever seen. As a psychological study he never forgot Flair Chaldecott, but he did not care to remember her. She stood out in his mind as a face with brows too broad for its lower half, and babyish rings of flossy hair pushed away from the startling forehead, beneath which those

eyes were even more startling to his analytical mind.

"Where is my patient?" he said, putting Flair gently on one side, and going straight to the bed.

Flair followed him, by no means repelled by his rather abrupt manner or careless dress, for if she had undue sympathy with animals, she seemed also to share their instinct. The doctor laid a large kind hand on Alma's forehead, and made his examination briefly. Then he turned to Flair.

"Are you nursing her?" he said.

"Yes." The fear in her made Flair gulp.

"Ah! you will need all your wits about you.—You mass of nerves!" he added inwardly.

"If you think it necessary, will you please send me a trained nurse?" said Flair steadily.

"I am going to send someone to help you to-morrow," said the doctor decidedly. "This is a bad case. I ought to have been here before."

Flair did not answer. All that she thought was in her eyes just then, and the doctor read them reluctantly.

"I will come early to-morrow," he said, and gave Flair his instructions carefully.

She was not a bad nurse while her strength should last, but worry always played havoc with Flair's digestion, and after a few days she knew she might break down for lack of nourishment. At present, however, she went about her tasks deftly and almost mechanically, knowing that she could trust herself to wake at any hour she wished to give Alma medicine, and confident that she could do all that must be done, for the night at least. It was a rather warm evening in May, and the window was thrown wide open. Flair never lost the impression of one moment of Alma's illness after she entered the house, but at the time she was outwardly unaffected, as if numb. She made a light supper, and gave Alma her

medicine again, and then she arranged the mattress and bedclothes for herself, which she had laid on the floor, as the landlady either could not or would not make her any other bed. It was only eight o'clock even then, and the lengthened day seemed as if it would never grow dark. Flair sat by the bedside with her hands clasped round her knees, and watched Alma for half an hour, during which the restless talking and repeating portions of plays never ceased. Flair had not realized before what sort of life Alma had led, or how cheerfully she had faced hardships that would have made her friend shrink. It was a revelation of appalling things—things that were not tolerable, and yet were endured every day.

Alma Creagh was what was called "an experienced actress" in the profession, which meant that at twenty-eight she had played nearly every line of her art that exists. She had been the heroine in comedy, and the villainess in tragedy; for one desperate winter she had nearly killed herself over pantomime work, and before that had had second lead in "rough drama," or melodrama; but her best parts were old women and boys—"character" parts, scraps of which she repeated over and over again to Flair's unwilling ears. Her work so far had ended in the tour abroad in comic opera, which had laid the foundations of her illness, and she pleaded piteously, over and over again, for one good night's rest, or sometimes seemed to feel herself obliged to clean her own room in an uninhabitable hotel, before she could go into it. Flair could piece in her experiences from what she already knew, and her lips set as she followed it all with her fatal gift of fancy. Not infrequently, she was aware, the women of the Company had arrived at some place dead tired, and had had to sit, faint and weary, on their own luggage until their rooms

were apportioned, and then might come this necessity of cleaning them before they could even wash or rest themselves. There were hideous spells of being carted like cattle in tramp steamers too, where the food was unfit to eat even for those who were good sailors, and where the one steward could not attend to everybody, and so the girls must either wait on themselves, or, if too ill, endure all the horrors of sea-sickness without the decencies of ordinary service. For the life led by a theatrical Company on a foreign tour is by no means the brilliant round of fun, and travel, and attention that some, even in the profession, still imagine. It can be a very grim trial of health and nerve indeed, and Alma had found it so. Colonel Creagh had never roughed it in campaign, according to their relative strength, as his daughter had to gain that experience to which Flair Chaldecott sat and listened, while she wondered less and less that her friend might be dying—it seemed enough to have killed any woman outright.

"Please, Aunt Fanny," said Alma suddenly, "I must go—I'm tired of this life, it is stifling me. And I want to earn my own living. . . ."

She had leapt back another ten years; she was once more the penniless, orphaned niece in the uncomfortable bourgeois household, where she had played Cinderella to her elder cousins since the first years of her life that she could remember. Alma had no recollection of being sent home from India at three years old, but she did remember her aunt's environment as it slowly unfolded itself to her young eyes. Her childhood's experience had been a thing which she never would forget, and had made even the drawbacks of stage life appear more bearable by contrast to its sordid, loveless monotony. Any one less gifted with vitality than Alma would have been worn down

to a dreary, hopeless drudge; but the instinct of self-preservation had forced her to fight fate, and her spirited resistance had resulted in her having her way, and coming to London to try the verge of starvation for six months before she got her first opening to "walk on" at a pound a week. How cold that winter had been! Once during the delirious night she fancied herself going through it again, in the bare London room where she could not afford a fire, and so had put on her outside things and walked the streets to warm herself—Colonel Creagh's daughter, with her big asking eyes and anxious face! Flair listened to that part of the story with white lips.

Sometimes Alma chattered of being asked out to supper by passing acquaintances known through a twisted note sent to the stage-door—there is a regular code from the stage to the stalls for those who care to make acquaintance across the footlights. She had never availed herself of it, but she spoke of a big man who recurred at intervals all through her delirium—a man whose masculine strength and protection seemed to have been good to lean upon, though he were nothing more than such a vague support to this waif of an irregular social order. Flair had an impression of him waiting at the stage-door to take Alma home, but strangely enough it did not alarm her or even make her sad.

"At all events," she said, in the face of her principles, "the Big Man must have looked after her, and—and not let her be tired and hungry. I am quite sure he would do that. I think he would be sorry if—he could see her now."

The vigil by the bedside became intolerable during that first half-hour. Flair rose and went to the open window, looking down at the noisy, living street, where the trams rolled by and people bought and sold—even as Magda had

looked down on a quieter scene at a crisis in her life. Perhaps Alma would never need to buy or sell again. Flair's eyes, full of blank despair, followed the moving, drifting crowd, while she tried to think if it would not perhaps be a good thing for Alma to die and get out of this life that lay before them all. She felt as if she had reached the end of fear and endurance, and as if there were no going on; and yet she knew that she would go on—still the weary round, still the dread of looking forward for herself and others; for when the Real Girls can do no more they have come to an end of things and stop, but Nous Autres know that they must still go on . . . whether they can or no.

"I hope Alma will die," said Flair in her extremity, and then the impossibility of facing her own loss made the selfishness of the wish a red-hot pain in her heart. "I couldn't bear it!" she said blindly, staring out at the steady flow of life below. "Dear God! is it never going to stop—this dreadful thing that we call life, and that becomes most intolerable when we dare to love each other! I will never care for any one again," said Flair Chaldecott solemnly aloud. "I am afraid of the pain. . . ."

Alma was at the height of her fever the next day, but the real danger did not lie there. Flair had nursed R. L. in distemper, and had pulled him through, and to any one who had seen that heart-breaking disease in its worst form, the care and breathless attention required to save a patient who cannot even express his sufferings makes the nursing of a human being light in comparison. She was not likely to fail in faithfulness, but the battle did not really lie in her hands. When the trained nurse arrived, she proved to be a pleasant, practical young woman, who was sufficiently matter-of-fact to be deceived by Flair's apparent

stoicism, and did not soften the facts of the case to her in consequence.

"We shall pull her through the fever all right," she said confidentially, as they stood over the patient. "The question is whether she has the recuperative power to struggle back to life again. They generally die of a relapse in these cases. You see, she has no reserve strength, and the cough exhausts her terribly. Of course, if she had not taken a chill on the fever she would have had a better chance."

"She was all alone!" Flair said with a difficulty the nurse did not grasp. "There was no one with her when she was first taken ill, and she must have got out of bed in the delirium and walked about—there was no one here!" she repeated blankly.

"Ah! That was just it, you see. The doctor tells me that had it been a case of simple fever we might have called it influenza, and there would have been no anxiety. As it is"—she shrugged square, practical shoulders that seemed to nudge Flair's raw nerves with the movement—"she ought to be got out of London as soon as she can travel, and have perfect rest at the seaside."

"For how long?" said Flair hopelessly, fingering her Post Office book in her own mind, and seeing its dwindling figures. Oh, if only she had not been so self-indulgent this past year as to draw any of the money she had so painfully put by! A certain blue serge gown assumed the proportions of a monstrous crime, though it had only cost two pounds, making and all. The ghost of the cheap claret, too, rose up as if suddenly proving its indigestible qualities, and morally choked her.

"Well, a fortnight might set her up, if she rested a bit after coming back to town," said the nurse critically, looking down at the white face

from which Flair had plaited back the thick hair to avoid cutting it if possible. "On the stage, isn't she? She won't act for a month or so after this."

Flair did not answer. She was wondering what parish Alma was in, and whether she would get "outdoor relief" if she asked for it? Flair had always thought herself rather sinfully proud until that moment, and was very shy of clergymen because she was an occasional contributor to the "Agnostic Journal," and felt it written large all over her in their presence. Her religion lay too deep down for discussion, and a sudden reference to any Person of the Trinity affected her with a sense of blasphemy that made her hot for the speaker. But she had a desperate idea that one always appealed to the clergy of the parish in an urgent case, and this matter was imperative. She would in preference have borrowed from the doctor, but his frayed shirt-cuffs and frankness on the subject of mutual poverty (he did it to make Flair feel herself an equal, and unintentionally set up a barrier to confidences) made her sensitive of even mentioning money difficulties to him. Indeed, his bill was one of the nightmares that haunted her mattress on the floor, and she reduced future expenditure rigidly in order to pay it.

It chanced that the nurse took her time off in the afternoon a few days later, and went out to get some fresh air in preference to sleeping. Flair left the night work to her now, and only sat with Alma in the day, for the work was slacker, the patient having pulled through the fever as the nurse had prognosticated, and only failing to regain strength. Flair sat by the bedside watching her, scribbling verses as a recreation, and talking a little while Alma was

awake. She slept a great deal, and it was hardly possible to gauge how much better or worse she was as it would have been with a more selfish patient, because with her return to consciousness the old bright cheerfulness came back also, and she never complained. Flair saw the nurse's final departure before her in a day or so, for she dared not keep her longer than was strictly necessary, and then came the moment when she ought to take Alma away.

"I shall begin putting your things to rights, and packing up for you as soon as I have arranged where we will go," she said, with a confidence she did not feel in her despairing heart. "Which dress-basket would you like to have emptied of its store of rubbish, Alma?"

Alma laughed weakly, and coughed in consequence. "The smallest, I think," she said. "It is at the end of the bed. There are only some bits and pieces and things in it."

"Oh!" said Flair drily. "Well, I will ask Winnie if she knows a ragman who would take them away."

"No, don't! I play old housekeepers in that black stuff skirt. It's a splendid 'prop.' When can I see Winnie or the others?"

"I am rather expecting Franc round to-night, and Hilda left those grapes this morning, when you were asleep.—Come in!"

It was the shapeless landlady, puffing with a message, and as usually vaguely incoherent.

"There's a clergyman downstairs 'oo wants to ee you, miss!"

Flair's heart leapt as to an answered prayer. What a lucky thing that this good man had chanced to call on the humblest of his parishioners! She could leave Alma for a few minutes, and nurse would be in soon. Hardly waiting to smooth her curly hair, she ran down-

stairs to the empty front room where the landlady had shown the visitor with a due sense of his importance, and entered without waiting to think that she was nervous.

But a sudden chill fell on her the instant she crossed the threshold. Either the dreary aspect of the unused room, with its shiny leather furniture and closed windows shutting out God's fresh air—or the aspect of the "good man" who awaited her, and whom she had somehow pictured differently—droye her back into her self-consciousness. He was no doubt an excellent man according to his lights; and he was undoubtedly a good parish priest to have sought out even Alma's case and to have heard of her illness. But it was written in the book of Fate that he should quench the smoking flax and break a bruised reed, and he was one of those who give the unbeliever bitter occasion to scoff. In appearance he was rather like a goat, from his thin bony forehead to his straggling grey beard—a goat with the burning eyes of the fanatic, and a loud, irresistible voice that beat itself in at Flair's ears, and never paused for answers. Perhaps he had grown so certain of being heard that to question it would have appeared to him a waste of time, and he regarded his message as one which required no comment—only reverent acceptance.

"I am sorry to hear of our dear sister's danger," he began in that loud voice. Flair stood still under the shock of it, just inside the door where she had entered, and looked at him, seeing in her own mind the white, cool bed upstairs, and the roughened dark head and big eyes that represented Alma to her.

"It is terribly sad when the young are cut down like this; but in the midst of life we are in death, and we must all bow to His will." The resonant words clanged like doom in Flair's ears

as she faced this dreadful man, who was calmly consigning Alma to the grave, and ignoring any piteous effort to save her. No doubt he had heard a very grave account from the doctor, but the result was one his informant never foresaw, and culminated in his next words—

"Is she a communicant? Would she like to see me?"

"Certainly not!"

The hard challenge of the clear voice did not seem to belong to Flair. She heard it herself with surprise, and a feeling that had it been flung at her it would have driven her back upon herself, as it certainly did the clergyman. He was nonplussed, but only for the moment.

"Not to-day? Then we will just pray to God for her?"

He knelt down without any sense of inappropriateness to one of the horrible black leather chairs, and in the same loud voice absolved and buried Alma, it seemed to Flair, without any allowance for hope. She stood as if petrified, in the same position inside the door, glaring at the clergyman with the worst of all her expressions, and without attempting to kneel also. Perhaps her stiff-necked lack of assent embarrassed him a little, or perhaps even his fanaticism did not blind him sufficiently to attack her further, with that look in her savage white face. He rose when the prayer was ended and took up his hat, making a stereotyped remark to the effect that he was glad to have seen her? Miss Creagh was her sister, he supposed? Good-bye!

Flair looked at his outstretched hand, and slowly raised her eyes to his face. Her courtesy did not fail her; she touched his fingers with one hand, while she opened the door with the other and bowed him out, not following him into the narrow hall, however, as the front door was just

before him. The clergyman, like the doctor, carried away a vivid impression of Flair's personality—he thought she had the ugliest woman's face he had ever looked upon. Had he known that he had filled her with raging hate and scorn for his Order, he would have been genuinely shocked and grieved; but the Church of England is a powerful body, though it has unwise ministers, and Flair's animosity was not likely to do it any harm.

When she heard the front door shut her visitor out, the girl was still standing in the same position she had kept throughout the prayer. Suddenly a grim amusement seemed to strike her. She thought of the goat-like head, and the priest's absurd posture before the absurd chair, and she glanced instinctively out of the closed window at a small lozenge of sky which she could see between the roofs across the way, almost as if asking Someone to share the joke. Flair's God was a gentleman, with a sense of humour.

There was no visible disturbance of her tranquillity when she returned to Alma, whom she found awake and inclined for milk and conversation. Alma took most of her nourishment as milk, and Flair, as she fed her, looked with a kind of wicked defiance at her thin face and hollow eyes. The clergyman's complaisance over her friend's possible death had aroused her to contradiction. Why should Alma be calmly shifted out of life like that?

"Flair," said the object of her thoughts abruptly, "did I talk a great deal of nonsense when I was ill?"

"A great deal," replied Flair composedly. "In particular, you were always assuring me that

'Pretty little pink toes
Always go in silk hose!'

I don't know what it meant, and I greatly question its veracity: but I am sure it is part of a good and great poem. Do you happen to know any more?"

"No! did I?" Alma was stimulated by amusement, and her face gained a faint colour. "It is part of 'Molly was a milkmaid,' which is the tenor solo in the piece I was in. I suppose I have lost my shop, Flair?"

"A girl came here two days after you were taken ill, with a message from your manager," said Flair briefly. "Fortunately the doctor was here at the time, and she saw him. I have had no more trouble."

"Well, I am glad I am not going to be had up for breach of contract," said Alma, with her unflagging gift of regarding trouble from the point of view of a worse one that might have been. "Who was the girl who came?"

"Molly—something. I forget. I didn't go to the theatre, because the last time I came behind to see you a scene-shifter asked me to sit on his knee, or some little compliment of that kind, and I—I'm not used to it! The stage is a great leveller. It always makes me feel that I must have a 'proud stomach,' not to be able to digest its equalities."

"I know—it's awful!" Alma's lips set, and she thought of the doorkeeper. "I think Panto is the worst experience you can have. I heard one girl cheek a man who was doing a Special Turn once. She was a little fool, for we all knew that he was a ruffian, and a Music-hall artist—but he made a rush at her and got her down. . . ."

"Before the Company?" Flair turned round really breathless.

"Oh, yes; there were a lot of people about, so she was safe enough. But it wasn't a nice situation for her. I made a rush too, and twisted

my hands in his collar until he let go. He was nearly choked!" said Alma thoughtfully, looking at her weak fingers.

"Did you ever have trouble yourself?"

"Not unless the men drank, because I was always on my guard. But one night a man I had never even spoken to before found me waiting behind the backcloth, and asked me some question. I answered it as I should any one's, and he said, 'Come and talk to me!' and picked me up and carried me into his dressing-room."

"It's a lawless world—behind the footlights," said Flair thoughtfully. "I should not keep an engagement a week—I know I should tell the Manager himself what I thought of him. What did you do on the occasion of playing a Sabine woman?"

"When that man used brute force? He was too strong for me to get away on the instant, but I fought like a tiger-cat, and when he put me down I bolted. I think I should have killed him if he had touched me again!"

"I wonder why?" thought Flair, looking at the distended pupils of her friend's eyes, for Alma was generally rather reckless in anything like an adventure. "Perhaps the Big Man was waiting at the stage-door that night!"

Magda turned up in the course of the same evening, full of plans and practical common sense. She had heard of a kind of convalescent home in the Isle of Wight, where certain certificates from a doctor would admit patients and their friends for a nominal sum. She gave Flair the address, and advised her to write to her doctor that night, and to the railway companies for passes.

"You must write up the place—tell them what you are on," she said shrewdly. "I always do when I go for my holiday. I choose a place on some line that will listen to my plea, and work

in return for my railway ticket. That is only fair. Besides, they will probably give you second class, and that is easier for Alma than going third."

"I haven't done much of this kind of thing," said Flair, knitting her brows. "Most of my work is fiction, you see. Never mind, I can article as well as anything else. I say, Magda"—she hesitated, and spoke slowly—"suppose after all we *cannot* go—to this place, at all events?"

"Never mind," said Magda callously. "Even if the passes were wasted it wouldn't hurt the Company. And you can read up the place and write the article anyhow, if your honesty is troubled!"

Flair wrote her letters and made her preparations, even wallowing in shabby clothes and theatrical odds and ends in Alma's dress basket, over which she groaned; but her mind was at stretch all the time to think how she was to earn or borrow even the small sum that would cover their holiday. Alma could not go alone, which would have reduced expenses, and her own small resources were strained to meet the immediate necessities of the illness, for she was expecting a big cheque, and her present money had nearly run out. Most of Flair's income was earned in "free lance" journalism, which meant gnawing anxiety between periods of comparative safety. If she could see her way three months ahead she did not trouble much, but she was obliged to depend on certain manuscripts being accepted, which were almost a certainty but not quite, and in the meantime eke out what money she actually had. There are certain fiction-publishing firms which accept manuscripts at once, and pay on production, though that may be eighteen months hence; others, whose system Flair liked better.

which keep the author waiting six months for a decision, but pay at once when they have accepted work. She was waiting for one of these acceptances now, and had not much doubt about it, but in the meantime she wanted five pounds. If she got the railway passes, she calculated that five pounds would cover hers and Alma's board and lodging and all minor expenses for the fortnight, but she had almost come to the desperate expedient of getting the sum made up among Nous Autres—a strain she knew she ought not to lay on already overburdened shoulders. She was still awaiting an answer from the railway Companies, when an unexpected angel met her in the byways of life, so closely disguised that had he not been the undoubted bringer of relief she would have denied his claim to be a messenger of Heaven, though God chooses strange almoners for His charities. From the very first his appearance in such a character appeared so doubtful that Flair almost declined to see him, for his advent was announced to her by the landlady almost in the same words that had preceded the ghastly interview with the clergyman.

"There's a gentleman downstairs wants to see you, miss!"

"Who is it?" said Flair sharply, under her breath for Alma was asleep.

"I'm sure I don't know, miss! He didn't give no name," said the landlady with an indignant sniff. It was clear that she disclaimed any agency in the situation, for she began to descend the stairs heavily, one flat foot placed over another to mark her disappearance.

Flair watched the shapeless body out of sight with a wry smile; then she glanced at Alma, sleeping peacefully on her pillows with the happy ease of a child—and with war in her heart, and bland expectancy on her lips, Flair shut the door

softly and went down to the front room of the last memorable visit.

There was no one visible for the first moment on her entrance, and she was some way into the room before she discovered the unexpected vision of a big man in a big overcoat (for the evening was chilly), with a big personality that checked her. She had come swiftly, meaning to dismiss her visitor with scant ceremony after her last experience, but as he turned she hesitated, waiting to be sure of her ground before making her attack. The Big Man put down a hat and stick on the centre table amongst the worsted mats and gilt prize books with which it was decorated, and came straight across the room to Flair.

"I hear Miss Creagh is ill," he said, coming to the point in a voice that matched his person. It was so good to listen to in its chest notes that Flair's animal instincts made her draw a shade nearer instead of standing aloof. "Are you a friend of hers?"

"Yes. I am helping to nurse her."

"Is she—very ill?"

There was no hesitation from knowing what he had come to learn, but Flair looked up quickly and reassuringly.

"Not now," she said, "she is through the fever—not unless she has a relapse. I want to get her away!"

The words came with a breathless rush, and her strained face waited to see what would happen. She had not got so far as this even with the doctor.

"Can I do anything?" said the Big Man simply.

"Could you lend me five pounds?" said Flair, looking at him through the dusk. He seemed very big, and she knew that he would not hurt two weaker things, even mentally. His size

seemed to make it easy to speak straight out for some intangible reason.

"Yes, I can," he said rather abruptly. It is probable that he also was feeling the strain, and it is difficult for a man to explain to any woman how much he wants to help without blundering, even to so impersonal and unfeminine a creature as Flair appeared. "I brought some with me in case."

He felt in a big pocket and brought out a pocket-book, from whose depths he took a bank-note, which he put silently into her hand. She was still looking up at him, and there was nothing horrible at all in her eyes. They were only flooded with kindness, and as gentle as they were for R. L. or Alma in her illness. She moved a step nearer without touching him at all, and her voice made him wince as tears would not have done.

"Thank you very much. I'll give it you back, you know."

"Don't hurry over that," he said huskily. "And, look here, that address will find me. Let me know if you want any more."

"We shan't," said Flair courageously. "This will do for the fortnight. It would go farther, but, you see, there are two of us, and I can't let her go alone."

"I see." He spoke as if only half listening, and glad to get away now that his errand was done. Flair followed him out of the room, and opened the front door for him, hovering at heel like a little dog.

"Good night," he said, lifting his hat in the dark, chilly street. Then he looked at the clever, unhealthy face framed in the open doorway, and paused. "I forgot to ask your name?"

"Good-bye," said Flair, with a prophecy. "I am Flair Chaldecott."

She began to write verses even as she re-ascended the stairs, a sure sign with her that some stimulant had made the thin blood run redder in her veins. When Alma awoke, Flair was busily clearing out the bottom of the dress-basket and doing up the motley contents into bundles, preparatory to packing Alma's clothes.

"What on earth are you doing?" said Alma sleepily. "It seems to be the middle of the night."

"I am finding revelations of your character in the rubbish that you collect," said Flair, with an unusual bubble of enjoyment in her tone. "All my respect for you has suddenly ceased since I found you the unhappy possessor of nine pairs of disgraceful gloves, five dirty old neckties, and one white pill! I don't know what any of these things appertain to, any more than I do the countless drugs which I have packed into the empty tin boxes you seem to collect as a connoisseur. Where it was possible, I have done the things up in bundles to await your decision, through a vicious desire that you yourself should deal with them. I couldn't get the pill into the tin boxes, by the way; it lived in a house so much too large for it that I was obliged to pack it separately. So it remains—a dingy monument to some former disease of yours of which I know nothing. I think what I resented most was finding one of my own photos amongst a pile of undarned stockings!"

Alma lay in bed and laughed feebly till the tears stood in her eyes, after which Flair abandoned her packing and gave over the room to the nurse, who came in to take up her duty. At the door she turned and looked back at Alma, as if casually.

"We are going to the Isle of Wight next week, Alma," she said. "Please get over all your milk-drinking and sleeping before we start, as I

decline to have a holiday with either a calf or a sluggard. Good night! I'm going to bed."

But she did not go to bed; she sat down in the further room, which the landlady had grudgingly let to her, to finish the verses, the rage of composition being upon her. And when she had finished she still sat there a few minutes and instead of reading or correcting her work as was her wont, she thought of the Big Man—and was comforted.

"I wonder," said Flair, to an inscrutable world, "how it is that Alma can do that sort of thing and be none the worse for it? If Winnie attempted it she would go farther and fare worse, perhaps; or if I . . . God forbid! But I could not have accepted the money in any case but Alma's."

. . . . . .

It was very still and warm and green upon the cliffs, and there was a smell of honeysuckle and hay there, together with the breath of the sea that crawled lazily over the rocks some thirty feet below. Alma lay on her side in a shelving nook with a vile Panama hat tilted over one eye, absorbing a little more sunshine into her being, and with all the Isle of Wight for a background. Flair was smoking—in direct defiance of Ruskin—and as usual making verses. It was like the land of Beulah—a breathing-space in the Pilgrimage.

"Flair," said Alma sleepily, "I will write in for 'The Cowboy'—it's going on tour in September. I found quite exciting things in the 'Era' this morning."

"Did you?" said Flair absently. The last line did not scan, and she hunted for a shorter word to carry her meaning.

"Yes. Do you think I shall be able to starve on until then?"

"I had a cheque for fifty pounds this morning," Flair roused herself to explain. "You can have half—that's twenty-five each. No, it's only twenty-two ten, because I owe five pounds," she added thoughtfully.

"I can't live on you," said Alma quickly. "I must get Special Weeks."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Flair composedly. "Even if I have to rake out your Aunt Fanny and appeal to her, or go to the Actors' Benevolent Fund. Look at my verses, Alma, and see what you think of them."

She leaned forward and put a sheet of blotted writing into Alma's hand. Flair hated showing her verses, but it was necessary to create a diversion.

"'THE BATTLE OF THE NEW AGE,'" read Alma.

"'The Men came down from the mountains—
And the Women came up from the plains
The path through the crags was level,
And the valley was heavy with rains.

There was neither justice nor pity—
For wherever the foe might lurk
The Men had a great tradition,
And the Women were new to the work.

Yet they struck far into the future,
And shut their ears to the past,
And the pain and the wound of the preser.
Were nothing but blood at the last.

The Men had the city to squander,
The joy of the field and the tent—
And nobody knew but the Women
What the battle really meant.

God stayed His laws for the contest,
While the angels held their breath—
And the red tide rose to the arm-pits,
And the struggle to live was death.

And the battle pealed to the mountains,
While day stood stark in the sky,
And the Men looked on to the triumph,
And the Women looked on to die.

They fought for the sake of the Others,
They struck for an unknown end,
Where every face was a lover's,
And every foe was a friend.

They fought both swordless and hopeless,
They saw where the death must strike—
And nobody knew but the Women
What dying for nothing was like.

God said, "They have wiped out Eden—
I have nothing left to forgive."
And when the battle was over,
The Women had died to live.'

What does it mean?" Alma asked slowly. "Is it Nous Autres?"

"Yes. I began it when you were ill. A kind of rage came over me when I thought what a fight we had, and how everything is made easy for men, and then they run us down for even trying to make our own living."

"I like them!" said Alma simply, referring to the verses.

"'Where every face was a lover's,
And every foe was a friend!'"

"They will never get into print," said Flair. "And I try to console myself for failures by saying that verse doesn't pay, after all. On the few occasions when I have published any, I have generally been sent a cheque for about seven-and-six."

"Why don't you write a play?" said Alma, to whom all things were theatrical. She loved the profession which had nearly killed her with the infatuation of all its victims, so that its very drawbacks became advantages compared with any

other to her mind. Alma chafed when she was "out" for long, not only on account of money, but through being actually homesick for the sounds and sights of a theatre. She heartily enjoyed the fortnight in the Island, for she was only convalescent, and the joy of coming back to life was a natural and healthy instinct in her happy nature. But she fretted over the idle time in London that followed, and snatched at the first opportunity of work, so that in August she took the Special Week she had talked of, and played in an old favourite on the south side of London to a roaring audience.

It was a wet, stormy evening on which she went back into business, but the outside world seemed to lie miles and miles away from the footlights, and was forgotten in the hot, crowded house. Alma almost pranced when she found herself back in the dressing-room again, with the familiar whitewashed walls, the pegs for the dresses and the theatrical "sheet" covering them—the grease paints on the long line of tables, the slovenly dresser, the chatter of the other girls as they made up. She was playing a boy's part, and all the madness of her excitement had scope to work itself out in the play. New business came to her like an inspiration, and she got laugh after laugh for her unexpected pranks and sallies. Such a night as this was worth all the illness and the waiting and the anxiety, if only for the coming back to life and the reaction of variety and movement after monotony! She felt intoxicated with her own vitality, and yet stepped aside even in the midst of it all to help a fellow-worker, and so won herself a blessing to crown her happiness.

One of the actresses, who was playing a subordinate part, was a married woman with a child five years old, who, poor mite, was allowed to come on in one scene as an extra attraction to

the gallery, who wept over her as the representation of childhood, but were by no means so sentimental over the fact that she was being kept up night after night and losing her health and the sleep her poor little body needed. The mother was ailing, and had tried to get excused from appearing in the last act amongst a crowd of supers—which was all that she had to do—but a brutal Stage-Manager declined to have her released for the sake of a private grudge. The baby, who was shrewd beyond her years, confided the whole matter to Miss Creagh, and Alma must as needs turn champion as draw her breath.

She had played her own part so well that the Manager himself sauntered into the dressing-room to congratulate her. He did so with the familiarity of tradition, and Alma passed the intrusion because she had a boon to ask.

"Mr. Leigh, can Mrs. Benson go home after the second act?" she demanded. "Her cough is frightful, and she has only to walk on with the crowd in the bridal scene."

"I suppose so," said the Manager carelessly. "That's a good make-up of yours, dear!"

"Yes," said Alma hastily, shrinking slightly from the hand on her shoulder, and wondering whether she would be wise to excuse herself and run. "But Mr. Prentiss won't excuse her, Mr. Leigh. Can't you speak to him?"

"What a little partisan you are!" said the Manager, with a good-humoured laugh; but he was pleased with Alma, and could afford to extend his favour further. He sent Mrs. Benson a glass of port wine with her permission to leave, and settled the Stage-Manager, and Mrs. Benson, seeking for the cause of her salvation, traced it to Alma Creagh.

Alma had particular reasons for hurrying away from the theatre that night, and scrambled from

her successful make-up and her boy's dress into mufti, as soon as she got her final exit cue. She was running down the passage to the stage-door, when Mrs. Benson, breathless, stopped her.

"Oh, Miss Creagh, I want to thank you! I hear it was you who got me let off. I'm going home now, and—God bless you, dear!" she added unsteadily.

"That's all right, Mrs. Benson. I just had a chance to speak to Mr. Leigh," said Alma brightly. "Good night—good night, Nellie!" she added to the child, and catching up her skirts, prepared to leave the lights and the noise of the theatre for the dripping side-street. There was no need for her to put up an umbrella, however, for outside on the pavement was the figure of a Big Man with a large one already up, who offered his arm to her in silence.

"Oh!" said Alma, slipping her small hand into it, and seeming to be swallowed up from that moment in the Big Man's masculine strength and protection.

The little child had followed Alma to the doorway, and now stood on the threshold, waving a tiny hand and imitating her mother's farewell in her own baby fashion.

"Dood night, Miss C'eagh! Dod b'ess you!"

Alma turned her face quickly, with a radiance on it warmer than a smile to catch the blessing, even as the Big Man led her safely away. And so she went out, into the darkness and the rain.

CHAPTER VII

"Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,
At last we beat our music out.
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

"We fought our doubts and gather'd strength,
We would not make our music blind,
We faced the spectres of the mind
And laid them: thus we come at length——."

ALFRED TENNYSON.

IT being Sunday evening, Nous Autres assembled early; for one may be late on Saturday night if one's landlady is good-natured, breakfast in bed on Sunday morning following as a matter of course. But it is well to go to bed early on Sunday, and to begin the hateful Monday morning, which leads the week's work, with all the strength that rest can give. The girls began to arrive after tea, and by seven they were all assembled.

Hilda Romaine was the last to come. She had been to visit old friends that afternoon, in order to escape the discomforts of her home; for she was the only one of Nous Autres who had hardly a corner to call her own. Sometimes she had the small room apportioned to her in her father's house to herself, but more often one of the children, who were her stepsisters, shared it, and Hilda went abroad to seek peace and quietness. As she had said, she was "very strong," otherwise the strain, both abroad and at home, would have broken her down long since. Even as it was it had added a kind of tragic patience to her beauty that lay like a shadow on her, and detracted from her youth.

Service was beginning at some of the churches

as she made her way Strandwards towards Flair's rooms. By the time Hilda passed St. Stephen's with the Sword, the congregation had reached the first hymn, and were pouring a full volume of sound out into the quiet street. She paused a minute and listened wistfully, for it had been a hard day—a day of fret and jar, and the misery of little things that go to make life intolerable. Some comfort might lie in the hymn whose tune is familiar to thousands; but to poor Hilda, pausing on the road of Fate, it came with dreadful meaning.

"'Mid toil, and tribulation, and tumult of her war."

She did not hear the congregation reach the next line. She turned with the words dinned into her ears, and swung along as to the rhythm of her own despair.

"'Mid toil, and tribulation, and tumult of her war!"

A man stared in her face in passing, and half turned to follow her. The girl lifed her head fiercely, and a storm of passion flushed her from brow to chin, colouring the mask of the Apollo Belvedere like an angry sunset. If he had spoken to her she felt as if she would have struck him, and she was thankful that in front of her was the little passage leading nowhere but to Flair's door and a few others, up which she turned and lost her follower. Hilda cried over her temper in secret, and prayed against it openly. She thought it her gravest fault.

R. L. was sitting on the doorstep as she came in, having been for a stroll, and seeming rather annoyed that he should have to wait at his own house to be admitted. Hilda leaned down to stroke him with a sudden sense of comfort in the warm, friendly Thing, and he rose on his hind

feet and lifted his ringed paws to the handle of the door. He could rattle the door-handles of the inner rooms, and make Flair open to him at any time (even in the middle of a manuscript), and this was his way of adjuring Hilda to make haste.

"I can't, old boy; we must both wait for Mrs. Bonnet!" she explained, and they were still talking when the landlady admitted them.

"I will take R. L. in with me, thanks, Mrs. Bonnet," Hilda said. "I expect Miss Chaldecott is looking for him."

"She always do be," said the landlady, in a tone resigned to Flair's lunacy. "He's an 'an'some cat, I must say," she added, with the faint pride of distant ownership. "Though why you all calls 'im 'Arold, miss, I can't think. It's an odd name for a cat!"

"We call him R. L., Mrs. Bonnet!"

"'Arral, did you say, miss? Well, that's odder still. Lor! 'Arold is a name, and the other ain't. But I always thinks you says 'Arold!"

R. L., with an appearance of faint disgust, cut short the discussion on his name by trotting down the passage to the packing-case room. There he pushed the door open with his head, which was his strongest point. His paws were rather small and weak for his size, so that he hesitated to trust his heavy body to them when he jumped, and never used them to paw a door open like most of his kind. But his head and shoulders were massive, and seemed hard as well. He fought with his head, butting his adversary over, and then he sat down on the poor thing and trusted to weight to knock the breath out of it. Most of the cats in the neighbourhood being strays, and consequently thin, R. L. had pretty well fought and conquered for many housetops round.

Flair was lying in the long deck chair with her feet up, for no claim of being more tired than her friends, but because she was naturally lymphatic for reasons of physique, and they one and all indulged her. She really had a weaker constitution than any of them, for she took her health as a grim inheritance from a worn-out stock, and tendencies, from hardships or excesses, begun in the Crusades handicapped poor Flair for the perpetual effort which she found life. Everything was an effort, from getting up in the morning to taking off her clothes at night; and unfortunately it was a conscious one; but the reward to Flair was the stretching of her small soft body on the hard mattress, and the delicious sense of going to sleep. It was no wonder that she thought of Heaven as nothing but the end of a long day, and if she could have afforded such a holiday she would have had a debauch of sleep rather than any dissipation awake. She saw the cat as he came in, but characteristically sat still and called to him, instead of getting up to greet Hilda.

"Hulloa, R. L.! Been killing any more cats? What a row you were making on the leads this morning! I know it was you—I recognized the stifled scream of the victim. 'Sing unto R. L., for he hath bruised the tail of his enemies!'"

"He was sitting quite peaceably on the doorstep when I came up." said Hilda, tossing her hat into the further room without troubling to go in. "And Mrs. Bonnet asked me why we all call him 'Arold!"

"How lovely!" murmured Beatrice, with a flash of laughter that lightened her gloomy eyes. "'Arold! Poor old R. L., how insulted he looks! It is as bad as mistaking a Montmorency for a Morris."

"What made you late, Hilda?" Franc said affectionately, looking at the unusual gravity in

Hilda's face. Franc observed through sympathy, where all Magda's and Flair's journalistic training failed them. "We thought you had gone to church."

"I don't go to church very often, do I?" said Hilda, with unusual curtness. In her memory a hidden congregation was singing as if in hideous mockery—

"'Mid toil, and tribulation, and tumult of her war!"

"None of us go to church, dear—we are all heathens, Nous Autres!" Winnie's laugh was the daintiest scoff. "We rise late, and mend our stockings, and break the Sabbath in every way. No wonder Flair gets letters from unknown correspondents, warning her of Things to Come!"

"No! did she?" asked Alma with interest "Tell me—I suppose I was on tour."

"It was last Autumn," Franc said, laughing "You were in South America, I think, Alma. Flair had been writing for some magazine or other which offered a prize, and printed her name and address. She got the prize for her story, but the consequence was that somebody sent her a religious paper with copious notes in the margin, pointing out how it applied. What was that about the Ark, Beatrice?"

"Oh, one paragraph implored the reader to take refuge in the Ark, and used other Biblical similes about the wrath to come; but what we liked was that the lady evidently thought that Flair was not among the saved, for she added in a footnote, 'Those who stay outside will be swept away by the deluge!'"

"We have all been expecting to find Flair and R. L. swimming for their lives ever since," commented Magda. "The Ark was a happy simile, though, in connexion with Flair. I believe that

she would cheerfully sail with Noah for the sake of having a zoological gardens on board!"

"It would suit me, too," said Alma placidly. "Flair and I both love beasts! Pass the cigs, Trix!"

"Not until you have afforded them their last two syllables!" Beatrice said sternly, Alma's economy in words threatening to become a mania, and causing the rest of Nous Autres to groan. If left to herself her speech would soon have been a language of its own, and even as it was it was hard to prevent her saying "circs" for circumstances, "Prov" for Providence, "prop" for property, etc.; while of such excursions into originality as "dotnitudes," by which she meant silliness (i.e. dotty), and "Iffbaffs," to express small things of no importance, it was hopeless to try to cure her. Alma was the sort of girl who has a pet name for her umbrella, and keeps her bicycle's birthday.

"Well, people may call us heathens," said Beatrice, almost defiantly. "But we have a religion—if it is only to stick to each other."

A chuckle came from the deck chair. "Beatrice's definition seems the religion of lumps of toffee!" said Flair.

"Look here, Solomon, don't lie there and listen, and then jeer," said Franc indignantly. "Get up and preach us a sermon—it's Sunday evening. Here, somebody, heave her out of that deck chair."

"Yes, do something for your living," said Magda, coolly reaching over and taking possession of Flair's claret, which she held out of reach. Flair made a grab, but the pretty white hand held it firmly above her ruffled head, and a general chorus demanded ransom of her. They dragged her out of her chair, and she went, good-humouredly enough, and stood behind it, her arms

resting on the back, her masculine eyes looking at no one in particular until the group had settled down—Magda with a perverse smile on her lips; Franc listening with kindly attention; Winnie drawing the cigarette smoke luxuriously through her fine nostrils; Beatrice curled up on the ground at Alma's feet; Hilda sitting alone near the window, her eyes still straying to the outside world, her thoughts half distracted by the line of a hymn-tune—

"'Mid toil, and tribulation, and tumult of her war."

So Flair stood up and preached.

"There are only two sermons really worth listening to, and they are the Sermon on the Mount and the Christmas Sermon; and as I am neither Jesus Christ nor Robert Louis Stevenson, I cut rather a sorry figure—stood up here to speak to you, and to be laughed at! I have no text, because I don't believe that a text ever appealed to more than a handful of people, and one may not get the handful together. The only subjects on which one can speak are the generalities incident to that sphere of life in which—God help us!—we find ourselves, and they are artificial, with artificial laws to which we have all tacitly subscribed by belonging to the community and depending on the police, and therefore it is these generalities that must matter to us all, whatever our temperaments—and don't you forget it!

"It is the fashion nowadays to sneer at respectability. I don't know why, I am sure, unless it is because so few people are respectable. Dullness and dowdiness are two reproaches generally hurled at it, but what it really means is endurance and restraint. Do you remember the older phrase which was superseded by the term 'a respectable woman'—an *honest* woman? You will hear the poor use it to-day—'I am an honest woman!'

for the more bourgeois, 'I am a respectable (and generally added married) woman!' but it means the same thing. Honest—the woman who pays her rent, which means that she denies herself to keep a roof over her head and not live in the streets; the woman who does not drink, or take drugs, or fall into any self-indulgence for all the despair that sweeps over her in this hard life of ours; the woman who does not cheat, even to take advantage of her neighbour, for all the temptation of excuse that she owns. That is being honest—or respectable. Just which you will.

"Of course, the more recognized application of the word lies in the curse of sex which pursues us all—every 'man-jack' of us! Death waits at all the street corners, one may say, and you never know when your time may come, if you allow yourself to think about it. Just so also sex certainly pursues Nous Autres, and dogs our footsteps in the filthiest forms if we look to the right hand or the left. Well, the 'respectable' woman is the woman who respects herself, and the woman who does that never need fear anything beyond the most elementary of street insults, which is hardly to be noticed, and is easily kicked into the gutter from which it came. On an average we are too intent on our own purposes, as we go about the streets, to even hear if a man speaks to us; and the woman who is obviously going somewhere on her own business is as safe, in all but neighbourhoods proclaimed as murderous, as if she drove in a carriage with an escort of the Life Guards. Whoever loiters on the roads of life will be accosted by every idler bent on mischief; to be busy is to be armed at all points.

"And indeed there is no safeguard like conventionality - no path so comfortable for a woman as the sure, safe one of respectability. That it is

deadly dull carries the consolation with it of having endured, and that it is dowdy is no reproach in this age of cheap finery. Believe me, it is only the people who have not been Bohemians by necessity who look upon Bohemia as an enchanted land. It means not having enough to eat, and having to trudge footsore, and seeing your own face in the glass grow haggard and ugly—doesn't it, girls?—besides the liberty of which people, who don't know, speak so enviously. Besides, what advantage is it to me though I can go out now and walk the streets till midnight if I choose, and accept any invitation anywhere that is offered to me? The consequences would probably be deucedly unpleasant, and I would far rather that my brother—if I had one—were with me to knock any one down who became a nuisance. No, there is a lot of nonsense talked about independence. Who wants to be independent? We would much rather that our fathers had made our living for us, and left us 'independent' of the world through being dependent on them; but since they haven't done it we must make the best of our own heads and hands. Only it is rather hard that we should be envied, *Nous Autres*, rather than pitied as we deserve.

"Respectability—conventionality—it is easy to have a fling at such outward signs of keeping the law by those who want to indulge themselves and break it! I never hear a man's cheap sneer against a woman's love of conventionality, but I know that he is smarting under a sense of defeat—somebody or other has proved 'honest' enough to refuse to help him to evade his own obligations! And he who openly proclaims himself a rebel under the law (it sounds rather a fine thing when self-described as 'not accepted by Society!') is simply offering an excuse for his own weakness

and dissipation. Social laws were found to be, and made, as a necessary restraint in a state of civilized society; unless you are ready to face the disadvantage of savagery, why should you hark back to its questionable freedom? And why should you be privileged rather than another? For the greatest libertine considers the Decalogue necessary to keep the majority in order—it is only his noble self that he excepts. One of the greatest pitfalls in following an example, or a recognized though unwritten law, is our very human tendency to contrast downwards and not upwards. I know no more subtle temptation than that excuse of being no worse than one's neighbour. 'But everybody does that now, and no one thinks anything of it'—one hears the protest on every side, and unfortunately it is true. Though why on earth we should regard that as any reason for doing a thing that has to bear such an excuse, I can't say. Personally, I am too conceited, if only I take time to think about it. For the fact that another fellow is, in my eyes, a cad, generally causes me to put my nose in the air, and say, 'Then I thank my God I'm a gentleman, and I'm not capable of doing likewise'—which may be pride, but it's a damned useful quality. (I beg your pardon, Hilda, and yours, Magda. The others won't mind.)

"There, I've done; and the best of a layman's preaching is that any of you can get up and contradict me. I know no more irritating thing than having to sit under a pulpit with a priest uttering doctrinal platitudes which he takes it for granted that you take for granted; and you can't get up and say, 'Well, I don't believe that to begin with, because'—and state your honest reasons. You can't even get up and walk out, because it isn't courteous. And the clergy always seem to start with a conviction that no one in the congregation

has either read or thought anything at all on the subjects on which they consider themselves authorities; whereas most of us, I hope, have honoured our religion by giving it more of our earnest consideration than other subjects. Which is one reason why I never go to church, for if a man thinks that I am a fool without finding out, I am pretty sure that he is one!"

And Flair sat down and put her feet up in the deck chair again as coolly as she had risen, whereat Nous Autres laughed good-humouredly and clapped her—which is a better reception than that given to many sermons. For she was honest if not eloquent, and she tried to live up to her convictions. When she was settled she took a long draught of the claret and soda returned to her by Magda, who patted the curly head at the same time.

"Very good, little girl!" she said patronizingly. "Now you have earned it, you may have your intoxicating liquor."

"You would have to drink about a bottle before it went to your head!" said Winnie scornfully. "There is no harm in Flair's claret."

"Did you dine out last night?" Alma leaned forward to ask in a low tone.

"Yes."

"Champagne or hock?"

"Champagne—and liqueur."

"Do you really think forms and ceremonies a good thing, Flair?" said Hilda, turning from the window to the girl in the deck chair—the poor little body, and the face with the horrible eyes that looked as if they remembered all the sins they had seen in former generations.

"I think them an excellent barrier—for us," said Flair, beginning a last cigarette. "Do you think they would exist if they had not been ordained for some excellent reason?"

"I hate barriers—I hate forms and ceremonies!"—Winnie sprang to her feet as if suddenly inspired. "I am tired of being bound down and set to labour like oxen! Let us have liberty, at all events! We have got little else. Hear me proclaim myself emancipated—a rebel to law and order, if you like!"

"Have a care, dearie!" Franc said gently, for Alma's eyes had caught fire, and Beatrice was looking up with parted lips. "We have two dangerous firebrands there—don't preach heretical doctrines, Winnie."

"I don't care." But her impetuously raised hands fell to her sides, and she laughed a little hysterically. "Yes, I do—I care for all of you far more than for myself. It's getting late. Who goes home?"

The parliamentary cry met with a swift laughing echo—"Who goes home? Who goes home?"—and girl after girl rose until Flair was the only one still seated, lazily, in her deck chair.

"Going to sit up, Flair?" said Franc, stooping to kiss her. (Flair was almost as indifferent as R. L. to caresses.) "Don't be late, old lady!"

"I shan't—it's clean sheets night!" said Flair, with a long breath of anticipated pleasure. "Mrs. Bonnet only allows me them once a fortnight, and then it's generally three weeks! I love clean sheets more than any other luxury. I suppose the King has them every night. It's the only thing I really envy him." She caught Franc round the neck with unexpected responsiveness, and whispered, "Go part of the way home with Winnie, Franc!"

"Why, dearie?"

"There's Somebody waiting, if you don't!"

Franc had to linger for several minutes to do as she was asked, for the other girls were trying to do a new coon step that Alma was learning and

consequently teaching to them all in turn. They came back through the larger room laughing and playing as boisterously as if life were jest rather than grim earnest, Alma herself setting the time to a ditty just then in vogue, which begins with an emphasis on the first note—

"*Won't* you tell your ladylove
When she'll be a bride?
(Shore-O! Shore-O! now we're all on Shore-O!)"

No one intruded Sunday evening on their attention. Flair lay in the deck chair and laughed, while the chorus stamped itself even down the passage in wild rhythm. She could afford to be satisfied, for she had noticed that Franc had slipped her arm through Winnie's.

Fainter in the distance came the closing bars—

"Rowing down to Texan City,
Going with the tide,—
Won't you come ashore-O!—shore-O!"

"And so that's all right—for the time being!" said Flair Chaldecott, idly reaching for a half sheet of notepaper lying on the mantelpiece. On it were a few long lines, some half erased, and all nearly illegible. She read what she had written, and unsheathing her fountain pen, which was only second to R. J. in her most intimate life, she scribbled a little more—

"Of Kurdistan, and how he loved the beasts—
(God's helpless, whom He places on the earth,
And says to man through those dumb mouths
'Be kind!')
They tell it in Farisha till this day,
For Kurdistan was lord of Khanrahar"—

Suddenly the pen stopped, a troubled uncertainty seemed to fall upon the tired, contented figure, and Flair turned her head as one called to

attention. There was absolutely no sound save the very faintest hum of the ever-live Strand borne in through the partly open window—so faint a hum that it was merely a sense of unsleeping life. But in the girl's face, and quite obviously in the haunted eyes, was the perception of the Shadow. She sat for a minute quite still, her hand crushing the manuscript. Then she abruptly scrambled out of the deck chair and stood on her feet, her body tightly strung up, not only listening, but looking. Something, to judge from her attitude of tortured resistance, should have been facing her in the room. . . .

CHAPTER VIII

"Then good-night, alas! . . . From ill-hap who shall stay thee?"
HECTOR BERLIOZ, "Le Damnation de Faust."

THE drab morning stole into the drab bedroom day after day, and week after week, and month after month, which threatened to vanish in a dwindling aspect of drab-coloured years; and each day the light that was not sunshine found the same aspects. There was a certain amount of cheap furniture that made up the necessities of civilization, and gave that inexpressibly unhome-like atmosphere to the room peculiar to small bedrooms in cheap boarding-houses; there were two worn trunks giving a restless suggestion of some one who had no real abiding-place in the world; and there was a grim uniformity of colouring that was yet not so much colour as the effect that everything had been toned by a London fog until it became one nondescript shade. Even the few personal belongings which Winnie dared to leave about (two maids had been dismissed for petty theft) merely accentuated the original dis-

comforts, and made her long for more settled quarters and a safer occupation. She had lived in boarding-houses for three years, and had seen the type in which such lives develop. Sometimes she looked at her thin rosy face in the glass, and shuddered to remember the elderly females with the covetous eyes following a dish round the table, and never speaking save of food or material comfort. There comes a time in such women's existences when their blunted senses are incapable of understanding anything but some mean and petty advantage.

The morning always found Winnie in bed, her fine nose generally buried in the pillow as if she would fain cling to that refuge for those destitute of waking joy, and her face was the face of a good child. When she slowly opened her eyes, from trained habit, at seven o'clock, they fell on the long blank window draped with limp muslin curtains whether it were winter or summer, and, if the day were clear, she saw a section of long grey street without, the dirty stucco on the other side of the way sheltering other lives whose background was the counterpart of her own boarding-house. It made her sick to think of it at last—the bewildering desert of homes that were not homes, the board and lodging grudgingly paid for, and regarded with suspicion by those who thought that they were not getting their money's worth to the last farthing change.

This was her life—this would always be her life.

Breakfast was at eight, because more workers than Winnie had to get to offices in the City. She was always down in time—the one bright pretty thing to look at in the dingy dining-room where the slipshod table offered her greasy bacon and inferior marmalade—kippers being sometimes a harrowingly salt alternative. Winnie's rose-hued face and hazel eyes sparkled in lieu of the silver

that was never polished, and her skin was as clean as the tablecloths were soiled. It was small wonder that the masculine element present was drawn to blink at her brightness as the lower animals blink at the sun. But it did not add to her popularity with the elderly spinsters whose memories haunted her in the looking-glass. If Winnie's livelihood had not been so precarious, she would have started rooms on her own account —not furnished apartments such as Alma endured between tours, but attics such as Flair's, only brightened with Winnie's own bright personality; but sheer necessity drove her into living as she might best gauge her expenditure, the hard sum paid down week by week being at least on the safe side of allowing no temptation to overstep the margin. She had found it a hideous life, but she saw no least expectation of it being changed for a better alternative. Unless . . .

There were three young men in the boarding-house whose manners and appearance would have recalled Dick to Franc Peyton's mind—a townified Dick without the honesty of rough hair, a Dick who wore paper collars and horrible ties—a worse version, in fact, of the Dick who had called upon her in London. Winnie had started by being amused at the attentions paid her by these gentlemen, and her amusement was so genuine that it would have been difficult to restrain her irresistible laughter even if she had not felt sure that their assurance would weather a storm of ridicule had they divined it. The actual effect, however, had been that each youth thought himself especially smiled upon, and vied with his rivals to be the more facetious. It was a humour of which—even as a misunderstood comedy—Winnie wearied in six weeks. She had been enduring it now for six months, and the sickening flow of vapid buffoonery was becoming one with

the sickening monotony of the long grey street and the long grey life ahead of her.

"Good morning, fair maiduenne!" was usually the greeting she received from one of her admirers at which jocular speech his companions glared as at one who had stolen an unfair advantage, and the other women present tried to stare Winnie out of countenance. "Good morning!" she returned rather absently, the smile round her lips a little mechanical. By her plate lay a rough envelope, addressed in a bold masculine scrawl. She put it quietly aside to read later—not here, with these prying, vicious eyes upon her.

"I think I heard you come in last night, Miss Dare," said a lady sitting opposite to her, on whom the bitterness of the overdrawn tea seemed to be taking effect. "About half-past twelve, was it not? I was going to ask you to shut your door quietly when you are so late, if you don't mind. My room is below yours, and I sleep so lightly!"

It had been one of Nous Autres' meetings, and Winnie was conscious that the ill-natured speech was pure invention. "I was in before eleven, Miss Jones!" she said quietly, looking the speaker full in the face. But in her heart she cursed the littleness of her sex, and still more the dreadful life that had distorted kindly womanhood to this. It would be her life, her probable degeneration also, in the long grey years passed in the long grey street.

She was glad to leave for the station and go off to her work, even though it meant going out from the warm stuffy house into the cheerless outside world. At this time in the morning of bleak April the day did not feel aired, and Winnie shivered as the spiteful wind met her round corners and blew dust into her eyes. She felt that the weather was a harder trial to a woman's looks than the most undoubted beauty could

stand; it made her feel plain to begin with, and she thought angrily that girls were not meant for the unloveliness of daily work.

The train was full of men who had learned to know her by sight, and threw covert glances at the slight, graceful figure. Winnie was built like a Frenchwoman—full-busted, long-waisted, with sloping shoulders, and a certain alluring look of sex that suggested a quality utterly foreign to her. But as she did not bear her character drawn up and signed hanging round her neck she misled the City gentry, one or two of whom actually dawdled past the third-class carriage where she sat, awaiting the least encouragement to enter, though they held first-class season tickets, and Winnie knew it. She set her straight back against the uncushioned carriage and glared at them, the anger in her heart seeming to concentrate itself against that unread letter which she had thrust into her breast, though there was little need to keep it warm. She felt the blood in it beat through the envelope, and when she drew it out to read it; it seemed a red-hot thing, under whose scorch and shame she sat curiously passive, wondering if the honest working men who crowded the third-class with her guessed that the woman sitting next to them was asked to be . . . Perhaps they had daughters of her age! What would they have done to the man who proposed —this?

Yet she did not tear up the letter, with its passion and appeal to her to leave the long, grey life and the grey world she knew, and to taste at least once of being happy. She read it calmly, almost smiling over the faintness of his description of the colourless existence she led, compared with her actual experience. Joyless, toneless, sordid—he used dim-sounding adjectives; but what could he really know of the long, grey day

that began and ended in the long, grey street, until the leaden skies seemed battened down over her head? The very necessities of Winnie's nature were sunshine and colour and excitement; she had gone without them all through the long winters and brief summers of the best years of her life, until she shuddered to look forward, and hated to look back.

"I must breathe!" she said desperately, as she hurried from the train to her office, and the City streets pressed her on either hand, with a strip of colourless, flavourless heaven to roof them in.

"What hope could lurk beneath such iron skies?"

A line of Flair's floated up across her memory and seemed to interpret her soul's cry. The worst of Flair's work was that, as she acknowledged, it was generally bad all but two lines; but those two lines had a trick of haunting the minds of Nous Autres, who were her most constant readers.

"What hope could lurk beneath such iron skies?"

"I must breathe—once in my life I must have fresh air, and colour, and sun, and be well fed and clothed!" said Winnie, and her laughter at herself was half hysterical. "I believe I would sell half my life for a series of good dinners." She turned sick at the thought of yesterday's badly cooked joint as a worse-cooked réchauffé at the boarding-house.

In the office the grey day made a grey twilight. The lamps were already alight over Winnie's table, where, sole feminine thing amongst a dozen male, she held unwilling court if the clerks chose to persecute her. The typewriter of a certain class of City firms should start with blunted susceptibilities as part of her equipment. Worse even

than the clerks Winnie found those in authority—the managers and partners of her doubtful "situation." Mr. Jenkins, the gentleman who admired her figure; it may be remembered, was waiting for her as she came in.

"Five minutes late, Miss Dare!" he said jocularly. "*I* have been waiting for *you!*"

"I am very sorry—the train was late," said Winnie briefly, hanging up her hat and slipping out of the neat coat that was too thin for the cold spring winds.

"Well, come into my office. I have some work to explain to you."

For a minute the girl hesitated, her desperate hazel eyes looking blindly across the ill-lighted place as if in search of succour. There was none, of course—virtue is demanded of the girl who works in the City as a *sine qua non*, and that she shall "respect herself"—a vague phrase, which if she keep it in its strictest sense she will, in Winnie's position, assuredly lose her situation; but, on the other hand, there is no certain reward even to virtue that it shall not at least touch pitch.

Mr. Jenkins had a pink flower in his button-hole. As he stood in the dangerous doorway of his own private office, smiling broadly in anticipated enjoyment, Winnie noticed the decoration, and loathed Malmaison roses from that day forth. She followed her employer with her head drawn back, and an urgent masculine letter burning against her heart. To be safe from this—to go no more with trembling limbs and braced nerves into such chances of insult! The ill-omened name of a "protector" to a woman, assumed a new mask of virtue in her eyes. . . .

She came out half an hour later with tingling cheeks and eyes too hot for tears. Her arm was bruised too, for she had struggled and flung herself against the hard angle of a polished

secretaire. She clenched her delicate, thin hands.

"I will not bear it! I will go out of this life, though death lies on the other side!" she said. "Thank God! I shall not go back to the long, grey street, to ill-bred men and women, to yesterday's mutton, any longer—once I have said Yes."

She sat there, fierce and dry-eyed, doing little work, but seeing mentally the inevitable stages by which she had come to this—grey day lengthening into grey week, grey week to grey month, until the grey years ended in a vista she could not face.

She left the office early that day, careless whether her allotted work was all finished, for she was not coming back—not coming back! The streets of the City felt as if the sun had never been there, and a cutting wind stung her through and through, more keenly than in the morning. Yet the thought of the Underground Railway was intolerable, and she felt that her cheeks were brilliant with the fever that seemed to have seized her. It was a long way to West Kensington on the top of an omnibus, but she was glad and not sorry for the bracing cold, and travelled slowly with a curious wonder that she knew she should come the familiar way no more again. As the busy streets gave way to the clearer roads that stretch out West, the lumbering vehicle passed other omnibuses on the same route, going East, and Winnie looked into the common jaded faces of the men and women riding outside like herself. This was the class amongst which she had lived during the grey years behind her—women who dragged their dirty frayed gowns and cheap finery up and down the omnibus stair, men who smoked vile tobacco which floated into her face as she sat next or behind them, and spat on to the floor. Those round her were of the same type, for the

better class had almost entirely disappeared at South Kensington, and as they neared the North End Road, those who still remained with Winnie were dwellers in the small roads turning out of the larger thoroughfare. She wondered if the fried-fish shops, whose very essence seemed to pollute the air, supplied these people with unchanging suppers.

She had bought a paper in the City, and had been listlessly turning its pages for something to do. It chanced to be one of the Gazettes, and Flair had had one of her rare acceptances in it, for the verses amongst the Notes were hers. Winnie read them before she realized their authorship, and with Flair's fatal gift for stabbing in the dark, they voiced the cry that had been raging in her heart all day.

"'CRY ALOUD!'

'And there was no voice, neither any to answer' . . . .

Grant us, O God, a little space
To taste our honey on the tongue,
And meet our beauty face to face
While we are young.

Not much we ask—a space to breathe,
To love Thine earth, and live among
The flowers we have not time to wreathe
While we are young.

A little while to look up straight
Into Thine heaven, serenely hung
Over our heads in purple state,
While we are young.

With all our songs untouched by tears
With all our harps divinely strung—
Unshadowed by Thy marching years
While we are young.

Too soon Thine ages sweep us down—
Thy Future has a shadow flung—
Over our Present, with a frown,
While we are young.

Leave one Ideal without speck—
Grant us one [illegible] that has not stung—
A few Faiths, God, saved from the wreck,
While we are young!"

Before Winnie got down from the omnibus she leaned over the seat before her and touched the driver on the shoulder.

"Would you like a paper?" she said, with a fainter smile than usual, he thought, for he knew Winnie by sight, and, like anything masculine, he was attracted by the prettiness that fulfilled no strict canons.

"Thank you, miss!" he said; and then something in her face made him add, "it's a cold night!" as if no other reason could have frozen the hazel eyes and the stiff lips.

"Yes," said Winnie quietly. She left the Gazette behind her with relief, but she could not give away the verses so easily.

"Grant us, O God, a little space
To taste our honey on the tongue,
And meet our beauty face to face
While we are young.

Not much we ask—a space to breathe . . ."

. . . . . .

Flair was writing late that night, for the impulse to work had taken her by the throat, and the pen would not go fast enough. She flung the wet sheets on to the floor as she finished them, as her custom was, and R. L. came and sat on them and smudged them, thus rendering them still more illegible. The impulse was running out, and Flair was conscious that she had time to look round and would be glad to breathe, before she discovered him. Then she laughed, and then turning her eyes to the doorway she uttered a cry—

"Winnie! How long have you been there?"

"Not long. It has turned so wet—I won't come in, I'm dripping. Listen!"

Flair listened, which she had not done for an hour, and heard the throbbing of the raindrops against her window-pane, and the occasional slash of it as it drove in sudden gusts.

"That was why R. L. stayed in!" she said absently. "Come in, Winnie—don't be silly! What do wet clothes matter? Will you have a change?"

"No!"

"A whisky and soda?"

"No!"

Flair looked at her friend's eyes and rose slowly, her hands gripping the table. "What have you come to tell me?" she said.

"I have come to say good-bye."

There was a pause, while Flair waited. Outside the rain made a monotonous tapping—inside R. L. rustled the papers as he turned over with a sigh of content.

"I can't bear it!" Winnie's voice whispered across the still room, but it did not seem to be Winnie's. "The long grey streets, and the long grey life! Flair, I'm going away. It may be only for six months—but I will live before I am dead."

"And afterwards?"

"There will be no afterwards—I shall never come back to throw myself on any one's mercy!"

"I didn't mean that," said Flair simply. "But one must consider one's people. (You have some, haven't you?) And think of the identification, if you——"

Flair's conventionality again!

"Oh, I shan't go over Westminster Bridge!" said Winnie with ghastly lightness. "There are other ways. There is a submerged tenth, you see!"

"Yes, I see," said Flair slowly. She did not attempt argument, or to detain her friend; it is an unwritten law of Nous Autres that they shall take their own pathway unhindered by their comrades, once they have made up their minds. Hilda or Magda might, however, have felt it incumbent on them to say more—to try dissuasion; but that was exactly why Winnie came to Flair.

"You think it is worth while?" she said more slowly still.

"Oh, how do I know?" Winnie flung up her wild graceful head with real anguish in her restlessness. "All I know is that we can only be young once, and I'm losing my youth, day by day, week by week, with nothing that I want in it. We have only one life, Flair—it's worth staking everything on the dice when we throw for happiness!"

"Of course, if this is all"—said Flair slowly "if you are *sure* that this is all?" She paused and looked at Winnie. Flair's religion lay so deep down at the roots of her nature that it hurt her to drag it up to the light of day, and she always hesitated to give her convictions even to Nous Autres. "Then it's as well to get everything one can out of this life," she said. "But—if you think there is going to be another show, and you may get a look in—perhaps it is worth waiting for it?"

Winnie's eyes met hers hazily, and she answered by a quotation that cut Flair with unintentional reproach.

"'And there was no voice—neither any to answer!' . . . Oh, Flair, I have *tried* to give it up! I wrote when I got home to-night, and said I wouldn't come, and it must all end . . . and then I sat down and looked at the letter. I felt as if I had put everything that made life worth

living inside. All the warm personality—all the decencies of civilization that we call being a gentleman—the association with just one man who not only cares for me, but whose mind is sympathetic with my own, and who doesn't offend my taste! . . . Flair, I thought it out, and I knew I couldn't give it up. There is nothing to take its place—nothing!"

Flair turned away and began to gather up the loose sheets on the floor. "Then you had better go," she said dully.

Suddenly Winnie threw herself on her knees by the table, and laying her head down on her arms began to cry. Flair did not attempt to touch her, or even to go near her. She went on collecting the sheets of manuscript, gently moving R. L. to gather them together, and listening all the time to the sound of the rain outside and the sobbing within. The catch of Winnie's shortened breath was as horrible as the feeling of impotence that numbed her. She felt the wilderness of the world outside suddenly around her and as touching her, and she realized that what Winnie said was true—she had nothing to take the place of the warm humanity she must give up if she were to be conventionally moral. The world offered no compensation to the woman who walked with clean feet through the streets of experience. It meant hard living and uncongenial work, and associations which seemed to degrade if they could not defile; it meant the handicap of being unable to compete with less scrupulous women in all outward show. She had no comfort to offer Winnie.

At last the kneeling figure rose and came to her, still panting with those horrible sobs. Flair stood up, and they faced each other.

"Are you going now?" she said.

"Yes. I wired to him as I came."

"To meet you?"

"Yes. Will you say good bye to the others for me?"

"Oh, yes!" said Flair hopelessly. She touched Winnie's cold cheek, and mechanically fastened her cloak for her.

"You *are* wet!" she said. "Will you have a hansom? I can lend you some money."

"No, I would rather not." The tears were still running down her face, and Flair stared at her stupidly with a sense she could not overcome that this was not Winnie at all—Winnie always laughed. Flair had never seen her cry before. An excruciating pain at her own heart began to take the place of the numbness; it was a real physical pain that Flair had suffered before after a shock of any kind, and it distracted her attention. She saw Winnie turn from her, however, and cross the room quickly, her cloak fluttering oddly as if there were a wind. At the door she turned round again of necessity in opening it, and showed Flair her face—not Winnie's face at all, but an abstract thing, a type of all the past loneliness and dread and despair that had ever driven women to this as to an escape from their own selves. Her lips moved, and she spoke from a long way off already, though she was there, on the threshold—

"Good-bye, dearie!"

The door closed, and the light tread sounded tap, tap, on the steep stairs. Flair stood listening, each painful breath telling more of the agony at her heart than in her numbed soul. She pressed her clasped hands nervously over the pain, and bent a little forward. Her attitude was mere endurance, but it stood as well for listening. Winnie's feet died out on the stairs; there was silence while she reached the hall—silence until the house echoed to the shutting of

the front door as she closed it after her for ever.

And so she went out, into the darkness and the rain.

CHAPTER IX

"What's the use o' grievin', when the mother that bore you
(Mary, pity women!) knew it all before you?"
RUDYARD KIPLING.

THERE was no question as to what they should talk of to-night. B.A. had come down to fill an empty seat, and the hungry deer's eyes looking out of her white face seemed to accentuate the tragedy of womanhood. There was hardly a word between them all, save ordinary greeting, until they were assembled, and then a chance remark caused Hilda to criticise Flair's last story on the ground of it dealing too frankly with the relations between the sexes, and that seemed to lead naturally to a discussion on immorality. No one mentioned a name, but one and all tried with piteous fierceness to advance some sort of excuse—not for herself or her opinions, but for the empty chair which B.A. filled in vain. It would always be empty from to-night, and some of them felt it as a tragedy—some as a dangerous thing. Flair and her story proved no more than a text, and Hilda denounced them without personal malice.

It was noticeable that Flair never troubled to defend herself while B.A., Beatrice, or Alma were in the room, and she had, throughout the discussion, been leaning over Beatrice, who was sitting next to her, taking less notice of the strictures passed upon herself and her work than upon some loose sheets of MS. on which R. L.

had been lying, and which Beatrice had picked up. The two girls were really reading them together, and perhaps hardly attending to Hilda's attack.

"His Majesty's ship the *London*
Was the first of the fighting line—
Ten ships of war where the Fastnets are
And thirty feet in the brine.
And His Majesty's ship the *London*
Spoke out to the other nine."

"It ought not to be thirty really," said Flair explanatorily. "Very few of our ships draw more than twenty-nine feet, even with all their stores on board. But owing to the exigencies of verse I had to suppose she had coaled beyond her capacities."

"But, Flair, how on earth do you know these things?"

"Oh, I have a store of splendid memories," said Flair with an odd laugh. "What's that you were saying, Hilda? That I do no good with my stories? Well, here's heresy for you! It seems to be infinitely more of a responsibility on me to do the best I can with the gift that is in me, than to hold my tongue because there are fools in the world whose weakness shall not hamper me. Though I wrote a dozen harmless books, which were inartistic and full of platitudes because I had been afraid to write better in the more unorthodox way, I should be more to blame, from my point of view, than if a book of mine which I knew was good work and true art made a dozen people break the Seventh Commandment. Understand me—I am emphatically *not* my brother's keeper, but I am the keeper of my own ten talents, and accept my responsibility. And therein, Hilda, you will observe that I disregard the Old Testament, but I faithfully hold with the New!"

"Yes, but why must you write like that?"

Hilda challenged, fain to re-create human nature like all dear reformers, and sure in her own strong singleness of heart that were she "Ruler of the Universe for one week" she could improve it according to her own satisfaction. And so no doubt she could have done, for it does not follow that those who think they have found a little corner of the earth to reclaim which has been forgotten by its Creator in the multitude of business, are self-sufficient or presumptuous. If they could have their way and remedy the evils that they can see, they would be quite satisfied with their own work, and would not be taught any humiliating lesson for their honest convictions. After all, it is not God's work that they want to re-do, but only man's marring of it. But Hilda must have gone back to many beginnings to make a new Flair who could write other than she did.

She looked up now, as if she knew this, the world-old eyes with their hideous wisdom fixed on Hilda.

"Ask my ancestors!" she said.

"Don't you know 'The Driving of Flair?'" said Beatrice suddenly, looking up also from the scribbled verses. "Flair didn't write it herself—it was written for her, and it's the oddest thing I ever read. What became of the author, Flair?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Flair, cuddling down yet further into her chair, with a grunt. "The MS. is upstairs on my writing-table. You don't want me to fetch it now, do you?"

"Yes, now!" said Beatrice calmly.

Flair grunted again, heaved herself out of the chair, and went—not because she wished to assist any more at her own vivisection, but because Beatrice had a way of putting on a soft pressure that was like water wearing the stone. No

sooner had she left the room than R. L. jumped into her empty seat, and finding it warm tucked himself into a flattened ball and slumbered with his paw over his nose.

"I never see R. L. do that but I wish I were a cat," said Franc. "It's so cosy. And think of the advantage of having no backbone to speak of——"

"And no morals!" put in Alma significantly.

"I don't think, you know," said B.A. meditatively, between luxurious clouds of tobacco "that the morals of the modern woman are any more lax than those of the past generation."

"It's a question of temperament largely," chimed in Flair, plunging neck-deep in the discussion as she re-entered the room. "The temperament of the age—not the individual. Feminine nature is hysterical just now with overpressure, and it's working off by running amuck amongst the Commandments—just as an overrun dynamo fizzles out sparks, and threatens to set the world on fire. They neither of them do it, though—properly handled."

"They fight fairer in America, certainly," said Franc thoughtfully. "The women who compete with men don't seem to lose their position and sink into mere rivalry, nor are they treated as inferiors. But one can only judge by fiction, and the American girl of fiction in a newspaper or government office appears to have all the men fall down and worship her!"

"She is very much of fiction," said Flair grimly. "She then writes the book of the season in six weeks, and has brain fever! Her publisher says that it is a human document, and she marries the President! In between whiles she unravels mysteries with a skill beyond that of Sherlock Holmes, and attends prize-fights to obtain copy for her paper where no man can get

himself admitted.—R. L., get out of my chair! There are the verses, Trix."

Beatrice unfolded the MS. in a handwriting that was not Flair's, read it, and passed it to Alma.

"Read it out to us," she said, as musically didactic as usual. "I like it. It is not Flair's own, so she can't object."

"It's beastly," said Flair, with great frankness, settling herself in her old place and taking R. L. on her lap, where he growled himself into slumber again. "And the worst of it is that I know what most of it means. I'm the only one who will, though. Go on, Alma."

"'THE DRIVING OF FLAIR,'"

read Alma, very slowly and distinctly.

"'There was laughter up in Heaven
When the Gods drove Flair;
And the scared Soul scurried onward,
Blinded by the going sunward,
To and fro and back and downward,
With her wind-swept hair.
It was sport enough for seven
When the Gods drove Flair!

Zeus had tossed a laugh to Leda—
"See me drive this Flair!
Pan would make another poet—
Drive her then before she know it!
And your bitter gift bestow it
To a girl's despair.
No relenting, for we need her!"
So the Gods drove Flair.

Said Priapus, "Give me leisure!
I will torture Flair.
See her run from what I teach her—
See her inborn instinct reach her,
While her Läres as a preacher
Warns her 'Have a care!'
For our profit and our pleasure
Flair shall fly from Flair!"

Said Apollo, smiling gaily
Down the Golden Stair,
"She is praying—she is praying
That the pain should be delaying,
Just a moment!—is it slaying
That we risk down there?
Let her breathe awhile, then daily
We will hunt this Flair!"

In and out across existence
Ran the quarry, Flair;
Turning like a stag at water
From the wondrous thing they taught her,
Blinded, broken, till they brought her
To the Golden Stair.
And with death in her resistance
Rose the cry of Flair.

From the goal she could not even
Understand or dare,
Racing back ere they could waft her,
She leapt outward through their laughter—
Leapt where none might follow after,
Fathoms out in air—
From the World's edge and the Heaven.
So the Gods lost Flair.'"

"Is that poetry?" asked Magda ominously. "I am sure it must be, because it's such absolute nonsense! I couldn't make out who drove what, where—and how did Flair come in?"

"The only thing that was plain to me," Franc admitted, "was the last line. Like the reader of Browning's 'Sordello,' I found the end of the poem quite lucid. 'So the Gods lost Flair!'—so did I. She was obscured by a maze of words all through."

"There was a good deal about driving Flair upstairs to bed, wasn't there, though?" said Hilda. "I know she sits up late after we have all gone. I have always suspected it, and this confirms me. The writer is evidently somebody who knows her habits."

B.A. and Beatrice looked at each other without

speaking. Alma folded the paper in silence, and handed it back to Flair.

"Well, I vote we end this gay and festive meeting!" said Magda, with obvious dread of more poetry read over her defenceless head. "Come along, B.A.—you take longer than I do to titivate." (This was rank libel, and B.A. grinned.)

The meeting broke up gradually, the girls drifting out of the room to put on their hats—lingering to talk to Flair or to each other—coming back as if they had still something to say. Before each of the original girls who attended the meetings left, they contrived to get Flair alone and ask an apparently objectless question that needed nothing to explain it but a name for the personal pronoun. Had not Flair been the one chosen to convey news of the disaster? . . .

Magda came first, extricating herself from B.A., and looked down on the messenger with troubled blue eyes.

"Flair, how did she look?"

"Like any one else taking a leap in the dark. They go rather white, and they set their lips. *You* know that!"

"How awful! . . . how awful! . . . I couldn't have done it. I should be afraid at the last moment."

"Oh, marriage would scare you—it wouldn't her. It's a question of nerve—not morality."

"I suppose it is; but you know my theories."

"You've got principles," acknowledged Flair. "Good night, April!"

Then came Franc.

"Dearie, couldn't you have stopped her?"

"No, Franc. And I don't know that I should have been right to do so."

"Not when you know what it must come to?"

"Mightn't there be worse? Don't judge human nature in the type, for goodness' sake!"

"Of course, one does not know what her temptations were, but there must have been some better way out!"

"Why should there? Does your experience go to prove it? Long grey years behind—long grey years ahead. Then she saw a splash of colour in the present, and flung herself on it. At least, if she were a gambler she gambled with splendid abandonment."

"But there's something beyond all this, Flair!"

Flair had suggested that too, but she did not say so now. "She had no religion," she remarked quietly.

Franc's sigh had hardly passed from Flair's ears before Alma followed her. "Will she come back, Flair?" she asked.

"She said not."

"If ever she did it would be to you." Alma considered. "Give her my love, and *do* ask her to come and see me!" she said, for with Alma love asked favours but never sat in judgment.

"She would come to you rather—not to me!" said Flair with an inspiration. "I should, if I were in trouble."

Alma passed on, "trailing clouds of glory" unconsciously to herself, and Beatrice paused beside Flair in an indefinite shadowy way of her own.

"Did you ever see him?" she asked.

"No."

"Do you think she was much in love?"

"Oh, love!" said Flair Chaldecott scornfully. "Love is a mere matter of spoiled clothes and indigestion. I can't judge of it beyond."

Beatrice's dark gravity broke into smiles. "How funny you are, Flair!" she said; but Flair did not resent Magda's comment in Beat-

rice's mouth, for it had gained a comprehension "Tell me what you mean?"

"Well, I never met any girl who was engaged and whose clothes kept their pristine freshness—did you? Years ago when we wore big sleeves a girl who was (supposititiously!) in love always had at least one sleeve crumpled. And they worry and worry and can neither eat nor sleep. A nervous affection like 'love' always upsets one's stomach!"

Beatrice vanished as she came, with the same appearance of not having paused with any purpose. Last of all came Hilda.

"You have nothing more definite to go upon than what you told me, Flair?"

"Nothing."

"I wish I could have helped her—she wanted someone to be strong for her, perhaps, and I—did not even know. Do you think she had thought of this for long?"

"I think she must have refused many times—many weary times!"

"And yet she did not refuse at last. Perhaps he guessed that she could be won over."

"Perhaps."—There was a pause.

"The hardest thing in the world is to learn to say No!" said Flair Chaldecott.

"It is also the noblest," said Hilda quietly.

CHAPTER X

"What of the Darkness? Is it very fair?"

"Out of the day's deceiving light we call—
Day that shows man so great, and God so small,
That hides the stars, and magnifies the grass—
O! Is the Darkness too a lying glass,
Or undistracted do ye find truth there?
What of the Darkness? Is it very fair?"

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

THE cheapest breakfast you can have (outside cereals, or mere bread and marmalade) is a tin of sardines—particularly if you do not like them. For the smallest size in some brands costs threepence halfpenny, and contains some twelve sardines; worked out this comes to a farthing and eight forty-fifths, or one, one point six, as you please, per breakfast. Because it is morally certain that if you do not like the fishy, salt, oily flavour of the creature you will only eat one at a sitting. Therefore your breakfast is but a fraction over the farthing for its principal dish; and even bacon will not work out cheaper, while kippers are dried-up luxuries.

Beatrice Varley had been living on small tins of sardines ever since she found that they "lasted out" better than other things, and eating a poor breakfast in consequence. It would have been as cheap, or cheaper, to keep to bread and butter and marmalade; but as school began at nine-fifteen and she had half an hour's walk first, she was prone to a hollow cavity inside her chest sometimes about eleven o'clock, and for the sake of keeping herself in health she decided that a good breakfast was a necessity, and inconsistently ate a bad one. Her deduction was false

and her calculation disprovable by a child of eight, but mathematics had never been her speciality, and B.A. flatly told her that she was weak in logic.

After the sardine breakfast she had a scramble that landed her, tired and tingling, at the schoolhouse door by nine o'clock, having begun a hard day by a mile or two's breathless walking, plump on top of ill-digested food. Beatrice was distinctly extravagant, and cannot be commended. She would walk beyond her strength to save a penny omnibus fare, and then would spend the penny on a bunch of violets or some other lovely indulgence that seemed a necessity to her nature.

The school where she worked was a private enterprise, and not a large one at that, though it numbered fifty girls—day pupils and weekly boarders—of the lower middle class. They were mostly the daughters of small tradesmen, who wanted them to attain to an imitation of the education, and a smattering of the accomplishments, of a higher social grade. Beatrice was junior mistress, but she undertook to start even the older girls in music, and her quivering soul was harrowed by some five or six lessons a day, at various degrees of attainment, but all tending to the same horrid end; for the ambition of the girls' parents was that Violet or Daisy or Rose should learn to play a "piece"—whether or no it was incorrectly played did not matter. Honest scales were pushed aside for something with a tune and variations that could be strummed before visitors, with crimson cheeks and sticky hands; and Beatrice, trying to forget that she was a musician, guided them patiently through each dreary stage of practice, until the thumped-out rhythm became mechanical, and only the bass went wrong.

Her woes did not stop at the actual tuition—

they were increased by a personal proximity that tormented her to the last strain of endurance. The piano was her sphere, whether as teacher or accompanist, and she not only played the marches for the musical drill on certain days in the week, but had to be present during violin lessons, and sometimes play the accompaniment for those pupils who learned the instrument. The school prided itself on the fact that it had two masters, as well as mistresses, for drawing and music. The Art Master was a jovial, fat little man, who was popular with the girls because he made jokes and was even capable of the familiarities of practical joking—when the Head-mistress was not present. He was a wise man in his own sphere, and could count upon his pupils' giggling adherence. On the other hand, the Music Master did not seek for popularity, and carried his head too high to see if a schoolgirl eyed him with favour. He was irascible over a false note, and he was curt in manner rather than ingratiating. Had he been mincing or effeminate, the school might have worked off its resentment in vulgar nicknames and private lampoons; but as he happened to be a broad-shouldered young man with a very English appearance, and nothing artistic about him save his temper there was war between master and pupils—a war which resulted in intentional, blank stupidity on the part of the girls, and a curbed wrath for which the Music Master could find no outlet save on the small, dark head of the Music Mistress.

Beatrice dreaded Wednesday and Friday with a special kind of fascination. On these days she had to attend four violin lessons, and endure fine sarcasms from the Music Master which passed harmlessly over the pupil's head, but made her writhe. Had she not played for the learner during the long, tedious hours of her practice,

and was she not plainly responsible for the horrible jangle of harmonies which the scraping bow evolved? She used to sit with her big moony eyes and white face apparently as unaffected as the fiddler, while every nerve in her slight body felt raw, and twanged to the catgut. Sometimes, in the quietest of her silvery tones, she would give back one of the taunts flung at her by the exasperated teacher, who would then shrug his shoulders as if Miss Varley's temper were a known curse in the establishment. And two or three hours afterwards Beatrice would fling herself face downwards on the hard black couch in her own small room, and cry her heart out because she had been stung beyond endurance.

"How can he—how can anyone like me? He says I have a 'beastly tongue'—he told me so straight out one day," she panted to herself, her morbid unbalanced nature torturing itself. "He doesn't like to look at me even. I am dark and ugly, and I can't even be civil and indifferent!"

Justice might have pleaded for her that the Music Master had not always been "civil and indifferent" either. Though he looked like the football-playing, beef-eating young Englishman who teaches boxing rather than music, he had all the impulses as well as the irritability of the artist. He played the heart out of Beatrice when he drew the bow over the strings of his own violin, and sometimes they forgot their animosities in mutual tastes and natural affinity. Perhaps half their cruelty to each other was caused by the strange love of power which lurks at the root of human nature in a sexual attraction—a power that loves to show how it can hurt as well as heal. Beatrice knew that she could irritate the Music Master as no one else in the school could do, for as a rule he was a very indifferent young man, who felt himself out of his sphere amongst the daugh-

ters of small tradesmen and their governesses; and he knew equally well that he could make the small, grave-eyed girl wince with his carefully chosen sneers. A reaction from this petty warfare was all the more dangerous because it was a surprise to both of them. They neither of them meant to capitulate, and they had both at various times been taken unawares.

There was a wonderful spring twilight in Beatrice's memory, when the room smelt of carnations —perhaps some one had made the Head-mistress a present, or one of the weekly boarders, who was a daughter of a florist, had brought them. The pupil had not jarred her teacher's nerves as much as usual during the violin lesson, and had been commended: and further, the Music Master had condescended to remark that her progress was probably because Miss Varley had seen that she practised intelligently. If she would only try to see that it was so always, it would make their joint task so much easier!

"But I do try!" said poor Beatrice, stooping to pick up a fallen piece of music. "I have sat through hour after hour trying to prepare them for your lessons. You don't know——"

The injustice of the accusation coming after the strain on her patience, choked her. She groped for the music sheets through a mist, and two large tears gathered in her tragic dark eyes. The pupil had rushed off the instant she was released, and there was no one to see her humiliation save the cause of it.

"Let me help you," said the Music Master with mechanical courtesy, for he was a gentleman. And he knelt down beside her to gather up the music also, and found two great tears fallen like jewels upon the title-page.

"I am sorry—I did not mean that! Don't think I underrate your work. I know how much I

owe you! " he said. He shot a quick glance at her. Beatrice's heavy hair had fallen forward to blind her more than the tears, and it was dark groping under the piano. She thought but would not let herself think clearly, that some one was stroking her hair—then a confused and broken sentence touched her hearing, and she was lifted up and stood in the circle of arms, and was ringed with fire. The two hot, passionate natures flamed up and met for an instant—the girl drifting in an indefinite dream where she was kissed and caressed and called pretty names, the man hardly more responsible as he fondled the feminine thing he had found too near his own manhood. The few rose-coloured minutes stood out like holy fire against the long dull background of drudgery during weeks and months and years. They were always rose-coloured minutes to Beatrice, scented with carnations.

Then the long weeks folded down again, in a grey veil which she was always unconsciously hoping would lift and show her a rose-coloured world. And the long days were only sections of lessons—nine to ten, History; ten to eleven, Geography; eleven to twelve, Music, etc. etc., punctuated by the giggling of the girls, the pettinesses of the mistresses, the bursts of ill-temper from the Music Master. For he was as variable and liable to moods as Beatrice herself, and she did not find the uncertainty any more bearable in another than her world found it in her. Of all the society, Magda and Beatrice were the two most likely to take offence, or to come within sight of quarrelling. There were weeks, indeed, during which Magda was injured and Beatrice sulked with one or other of the easier-going of their friends. That it never came to a quarrel was due to the strenuous reality of their lives. Nous Autres learn to pass over anything more

trivial than the problem of bread-getting, and have little time for fancied slights or resented actions in the fight for existence. They have looked so hard into the Medusa-face of life that they have grown impervious to pin-pricks, and if they have lost some feminine graces, they have also slipped the swaddling bands of their sex. Besides which their friendship for each other is a proven thing, tested in the furnace of the struggle for existence, and triumphant even over the instinct of self-preservation.

Nevertheless, Beatrice was not easy to live with as yet. She was young enough for the blood to be hot in her veins, and experience had not tamed her into that endurance whose end has never been reached save in death, which is an attribute of women. The Music Master told her, brutally, that she had a "pose" for every day of her life —she acted to herself for lack of any more interested audience. The half-truth of his taunt drove Beatrice into stupid silence in his presence for some time afterwards, and made him bring a new accusation of obstinate rudeness. Sometimes, after a bout with him, she wondered that she could care in the least what he thought or said, and her whole slim body felt bruised with her pent-up rage; but though she could hate him, she could never school herself to indifference. It is almost impossible for a woman to hate the only personality that brings any interest into her life, and stands to her for colour and harmony and light in a toneless world. Of all professions, that of a teacher or governess is most narrowing; she has a routine of work which strains the interest she might otherwise take in her profession, yet she is probably so situated that she never hears of anything else. Those who teach, talk "shop" to a greater degree than is the case in any other calling, except perhaps that of the stage, and it is "shop" of the

most limited description, being generally bounded by the walls of the school which at the moment makes the world to them. It is seldom that there is any masculine element sufficiently emphatic in their lives to leaven the feminine lump, and so monotony grinds the youth out of them, until the mighty Universe of which they know so much becomes only a theory on a blackboard. But Beatrice was worse off than the majority, in that she did not even take an interest in the details of her employment, being soul-weary of it. She had once, in a moment of mistaken enthusiasm, asked three or four of her fellow-mistresses to tea, under the impression that once they were all together and away from the school, she would get beyond the routine and technique of the daily grind, and discover their real tastes. As it happened, their real tastes, fortunately for them, were bounded by their profession, and to Beatrice's dismay, she had no sooner started the Science Mistress and the French Mistress on tea and muffins, than they plunged straight into the iniquities and capabilities of their respective pupils.

"I say, what does Maud Smith *do*, in your class?" said the French Mistress desperately, stretching her long limbs before Beatrice's fire, and evidently regarding the present as an excellent opportunity to compare notes with her companion. For to the teacher who loves her work, the child in her hands is the malleable clay on which she imprints her capabilities by success or the reverse. The French Mistress was a long, lazy girl, with a handsome face and an emotional nature. Beatrice, sitting by in increasing silence, discovered suddenly that she had always faintly disliked her.

"She doesn't do anything," said the Science Mistress disgustedly, "except set her clothes alight in the chemical laboratory, or cut her fingers

with the razors at the botany class. As to brains, she hasn't any! She can be painstaking and get hold of a fact by memory, and then when she has made herself stupid with learning it, she is surprised and injured that I am not satisfied!"

"Who's that?" broke in the Arithmetic Mistress. "Maud Smith? Oh, come, she's not so bad. She can do a little, though she's not brilliant."

"H'm! Sums are evidently her forte," said Science grimly. "All I can tell you is that she'll never pass her Senior Oxford, and Miss Seaton" (the Head-mistress) "will think I am no crammer."

Beatrice, who hated the said Maud Smith because of many hours of hopeless tuition in "Czarina" and the "Cavalleria Rusticana," felt as if she heard those splay fingers once more thumping out the A natural in the massacred Intermezzo. She changed the subject to books, and in a pause of conversation with French, who had plainly one ear on the others, she heard Science say to Arithmetic, "Oh! they are an A school!" And Arithmetic answered, "Well, even if we are on B, you are bound to give three hours to Science, and you'll have to have an assistant, for you can't do it."

After that Beatrice tried no more experiments in dissociating her fellow-victims from the school. They did not want to be dissociated—they were far more interested in the extending capacity of Maud Smith's brain and what it could take in, than in what George Meredith and Thomas Hardy could turn out. It added another bitterness to Beatrice's lot that she felt herself a pariah even in her profession, and cut off from the comradeship of mutual interest. B.A. was the only woman she knew in the teachers' world who could

cheerfully talk shop, or with equal intelligence and interest discuss the whole wide world of art, as though education did not exist. But then B.A. was rather exceptional in all ways, and Nous Autres cherished her accordingly. As things were in Beatrice's existence, it was the Music Master who kept her at least stingingly alive by the friction of their intercourse. The world was bitter by reason of him, but not sterile.

The term usually ended in a dreadful afternoon function called the "breaking-up," when the parents of the girls made the familiar schoolrooms seem horribly underbred as well as sordid. Beatrice loathed the very atmosphere of these ceremonies, as well as the people who attended; and it was with abject apologies that—as the governesses were allowed to ask a friend—she had sometimes begged Alma or Hilda or Winnie to come and support her. They did so cheerfully in borrowed plumes; for it is a point of honour among Nous Autres to "look nice" when backing each other up, and as somebody is generally at a low ebb in finance, and has not all the intricate details that go to make up a woman's appearance at a party, it becomes necessary for those who have to lend to those who have not. On one historical occasion Winnie went to a journalistic "At Home" with Magda, in a skirt of Hilda's, a blouse of her own, Alma's hat, Franc's gloves, and Beatrice's umbrella. It was no use borrowing anything of Flair except ready money, because her possessions consisted mainly in a black silk evening gown and a blue serge skirt. Alma said she collected blue serge skirts, she had so many in various stages of decay, and it is certain that as fast as one wore out she bought another, without being able to bring herself to part with the discarded garment. The black silk frock had appeared in comedy when Alma played near

London, and had dined at quite respectable suburban tables when Franc was asked out; but for that matter evening clothes were so general a property that sometimes the girls were themselves ignorant as to who had been the original owner.

The "breaking-up" party following on the twilight that was scented with carnations, was, however, an event to which Beatrice looked forward in secret—not because the tradesmen papas and perspiring mammas would be more possible, or of a different class—not because there would be any outsiders who would be more desirable, or bread and butter and cake of a kinder quality—not because Daisy, or Rose, or Violet would strum out the too familiar pieces with less sticky fingers, or because she hoped that her patient tuition would show any marked success in any pupil. She looked forward to the breaking-up for the simply feminine reason that one pair of eyes would see her in a setting that was not ink-stained, or so native to every day that he thought last term's blouse and skirt the same as this. In fact, the Music Master would be present, and as it was the summer term Beatrice had an excuse for wearing muslin—the "something pretty" of her wistful taste. How she hated ugly things, and how keenly she appreciated the daintiness of delicate fabrics and the froth of frills, until it seemed to her that her love of such things was almost a vice in itself! She was not going to borrow this year—she was animated to the extravagance of buying a whole white muslin gown that would not be so very sevriceable afterwards, and having it made for her, in order to look well for once in one man's sulky blue eyes. And she decked herself for sacrifice as woman has since the beginning of Creation.

It was a dream dress, and Beatrice enjoyed

herself in it in anticipation as she could have done on no real occasion, though she had been able to choose and decree every minute of her own happiness. It had a very slight train—more a whisper of skirts over the floor than a train—and was fluffed with frills; there were lace and chiffon about her slight bust that disguised her thinness, and into the broad satin ribbon at her waist she tucked a bunch of carnations in perspective. The memory of their scent alone was something to enjoy beforehand. Beatrice had had so few dresses that had given her any pleasure, and the feminine trait in her was so strong, that that one long white muslin gown became a real thing to her—a thing that wrapped her future in its folds, and was magic and mysterious.

It happened that the evening before the break-up of the school, she sat in her own rooms putting the last finishing touches to the fateful dress—such intimate and personal trifles as no dressmaker could do, while she dreamed over it at the same time; but anyone who had looked closely at the young face in the July evening, might have thought that in some fantastic painter's brain it could have belonged either to a bride with her wedding dress, or a maiden sewing her shroud. For the touch of the tragic was on Beatrice at all times, and the end of the term had left her dragged enough to make her face suggest the verge of illness. The veins stood out too sharply on her temples, and if her face had not been so young and round, it would have looked haggard. Sardine breakfasts and overwork, coupled with the mental strain engendered by the Music Master, had not agreed with Beatrice. Hilda had spoken privately to Alma about her only the last time the Society had met; but Alma's remedy sounded a doubtful one.

"I know. I think she will break down if she

goes on with this school life," she said. "I want her to use her voice. I have spoken to Buttermann and Clerk about her, and she must go up and have her voice tried the next time they have a batch of girls singing for chorus."

Hilda drew her eyebrows together and considered the subject. She knew Beatrice's temperament, probably better than the rest of Nous Autres, and stage life, from Alma's experience, did not seem the cure for neurotic ailments.

None the less, the suggestion had appealed to Beatrice herself, though merely as a means of escape. Her voice was rather exceptional, and had long represented a stairway of Hope in her life whereby she might climb from uncongenial drudgery to something at least enjoyable in spite of hard work. Anything was better than the atmosphere and the employment against which she chafed at present, and she had an honest little desire to get away from the dangers of carnations and summer twilights. The fact that she was, fundamentally, loath to leave the school, drove her into doing so if possible, from the common sense which had been drilled into her since the days of the charitable institution where her education was begun. She did not particularly look forward to the associations and the privations of stage-life, for Alma had taken her behind the scenes too genuinely for that; but she did long for movement and change, as one longs for an anæsthetic to ease one of a too familiar pain.

It was of this possible change in her existence that Beatrice was thinking as she sat sewing at her dainty white gown, rather than of the Music Master, who had been more cross-grained than ever during the past week. It had become more pain than pleasure to think of him, and she resolutely turned her mind to the impersonal subject; for Butterman and Clerk were "trying

voices " for a comic opera to go out on an autumn tour, and Beatrice had decided to take her courage in both hands and see if they would engage her for chorus at the magnificent salary of some twenty-five shillings a week. Perhaps, if she were lucky, she might even get thirty; but she had learned to starve, and the prospect of a low wage did not trouble her much. Unfortunately, Alma could not go with her to her ordeal, for she was taking a "Special Week" at Brighton, and the trial of voices came off at the Sovereignty Theatre the day after the school breaking-up. She grew really absorbed in her speculations, and did not hear the door-bell ring, or her landlady's foot on the stairs. When there came a tap on the door, she said "Come in!" in her pretty soft voice, and did not glance up. The door had been opened and shut before she realized that the Music Master was in the room—in her room, for the first time!—looking at her across the snowy pile of muslin on her lap with a half amusement, half apology, in his vexed blue eyes.

"I've come round to arrange about the accompaniments with you—if you don't mind?" he said.

Beatrice was as composed as if she were chaperoning a violin lesson, and the pupils were giggling—on which occasions there was always a faint irony in her downcast eyes and quiet lips. "No, I don't mind," she said, and only glanced from the work on her lap to indicate a chair. "Won't you sit down?" she suggested.

The Music Master sat down, a little embarrassed out of his dignity by the novel situation. He had never seen Beatrice under domestic influences before, and the white muslin frills seemed to make the soft feminine look of her more apparent than usual. He did not feel at all inclined to be irritated as he sat in the shabby armchair opposite

to her; but he wished she would speak. The little soft, dark head seemed to be bent by its own masses of hair, and the white face was as a match to the tinder of his eyes.

(In her tortured heart the girl was praying to some God to rescue her. "Why has he come Why is this thing happening to me—now?" she thought wildly. And then the over-wrought, over-tired woman's soul cried out for judgment against her lot—"My punishment is greater than I can bear!")

"Well?" she said laconically, for it was Beatrice's curse that the crisis of a lifetime would not loosen her tongue, or give her the power to help her own cause.

"Well!" echoed the Music Master a trifle pettishly. "Are you going to play them, or am I?"

"I will, of course, if you wish it," said Beatrice, with the touch of bitterness she would have given ten years of her life to have avoided. "But I thought that as it is such an important occasion, you would perhaps prefer to see your pupils through their task yourself?"

"As if I cared?" He wriggled his broad shoulders discontentedly against the old leather chair, and his shaven lips took a wry twist. "You and I know the inevitable torture of such exhibitions—and their real native value!"

"Then, on the whole, you would prefer me to share the—torture?"

For the life of her she could not help it. But by a saving grace of Fate she looked up and smiled after the words, and though he frowned, he met the misty brown eyes and forgot to be cross.

"Yes," he nodded. "Of course I should prefer *you* to be tortured!" The emphasis made the words almost a caress, and the scent of long-

dead carnations seemed to hover ghostlike in the air.

Beatrice went on sewing, and the Music Master asked permission to smoke. He took out an old briar, and proceeded to give a vaguely masculine flavour to Beatrice's room, and even to her gown for the party. And she sat there in a happy dream of which the blue spiral fumes of the tobacco seemed a part, and she knew that it would all pass too soon; but she "played" that it would last—just as she had always done about the things she most desired in life. When Beatrice was a little girl she had played at going to children's parties because she never went to one; later, she had played at going to dances, and would tell Flair or Alma all about these dream occasions, and what she had worn, and which partner she liked best—even what they said to her, if coaxed. She had never been disappointed of a pleasure but the angel of her imagination had whispered its ideal possibilities to comfort her. It was all a game—well, life itself had seemed a sorrier game to Beatrice than her dreams of happiness.

And it is probable that the Music Master enjoyed himself, for men love to see the feminine creature which has interested them in a proper domestic setting. So he talked about music, and even let slip a hint or two of his private ambitions and aspirations, while Beatrice felt that the confidence raised her to a level she had never touched before by reason of a sense of honoured delight. When the July evening darkened into dusk and she lit a lamp, he did not move, but a clock striking made him start at last.

"Ten, by Jove! And I've been gassing here for hours. Why didn't you turn me out, Miss Varley?"

"Perhaps I did not want to," said Beatrice, but

so indifferently that the truth did not startle either of them. She smiled her inscrutable smile in the shadow of her rich hair, and he thought her eyes were like those of some martyr's in a shrine.

"Haven't you finished with that finery yet?" he said half teasingly. "You have been at it all evening, and you are now trying to beautify it still more. How women do love their clothes!"

"I have so few, you see," said Beatrice imperturbably. "When I do have anything pretty, it becomes an event in my life."

"And you like pretty things?" His voice was actually a caress now, as he stood up to say good-bye. "You ought always to have pretty things, too, oughtn't you?"

Something in her face and swaying figure put him in mind of Solweig's Song, and a line of the far-away, haunting melody was really in his brain as they shook hands—Solweig's Song, that means many things to different people, but to the Music Master just then meant shadowy hair and brown eyes with black lashes.

"God watch over thee at the dawn of each day—
The dawn of each day.
God bless thee every time that thou kneelest to pray—
Thou kneelest to pray!"

Perhaps Grieg is responsible for what followed. I would not blame the Music Master, who, I suppose, was "only a man" in that dreariest of excuses usually offered to God for being lower than the beasts which perish. Possibly the Creator and the created regard that "only" from a different standpoint—it is certain that the look for different results.

Beatrice wandered after her guest to the doorway, as if her restless feet strayed against her will. Outside in the passage the dingy gas-lamp had not been lit, and there was a decent darkness to

hide the ugliness of the surroundings. The man drew the door nearly shut behind them, the effect being as if he put out the lamp in the room they had just left, and took the girl in his arms, letting her rest against the reality of his broad chest, and feeling for her eyes with his lips to close them with kisses. Beatrice reached her hand up to his neck in her turn, remembering how tanned he was, for he had cycled all the summer with a typical love of fresh air and exercise. Both of them kissed the memory of what they could not actually see—the man's tanned face, and the girl's eyes and hair, seeming to each in turn the reason of their desire. It was very good to cling and kiss even in the narrow darkness of a London lodging-house, and they had no wish for a less material bliss at the moment, nor did they repent of the natural impulse, and cry "Shame!" Shame comes when the apple is eaten and nothing is left but the core. Beatrice did not flinch from her fruit-gathering as yet, or ask pardon.

She dozed through that night, lying in her small, narrow bed face to face with the bare window, until the London dawn came past the chimney-pots to wake her from her fitful sleep, and she opened her unwilling eyes to meet the day. For even the joy to come and the wearing of a white gown for one pair of vexed blue eyes, could not altogether rival the feverish pleasure of those dreams which were scented with carnations and alive with kisses. The morning was a hazy golden vision, during which she helped to make the monotonous schoolrooms as tolerable to party eyes as might be, for lessons were set aside on this momentous occasion, and the schoolgirls thought of their frocks and ribbons as much or more than the teachers. Beatrice sang softly as she arranged flowers and placed the refreshment tables, and hardly cared to eat a scrappy

luncheon before rushing back to her room to change her dress.

Clothes are the comedy of the rich and the tragedy of the poor. When a woman with unlimited pin-money is dissatisfied with her own choice, it gives her at least the interest of choosing all over again, and of shopping afresh; but when her sister of the meagre dress allowance makes a mistake, she must abide by it. If Beatrice's extravagance in the way of white muslin had been a failure, it would have hampered her for some months without even the ephemeral pleasure for which she had risked it; she certainly could not have replaced it, even by something more serviceable. But by grace of Providence the gown was a success, from its tucked and chiffoned bodice to the last snowy frill on the graceful skirt—or was there a grin on the face of Fate as she arrayed herself in it and looked at herself in the glass? She had parted her hair at the side as Nous Autres loved it, and tucked the carnations into her waistband, and the effect was all and more than she had planned. Only the details of her appearance were borrowed—Alma's seed-pearls round her throat, Franc's pretty slippers on her feet, a high tortoiseshell comb of Flair's supporting the heavily massed hair. The reflection in the glass was the last good gift that life held in store for Beatrice, and beyond lay sorrow. But she turned away unknowing.

Hilda was the only one of her friends who was coming to the breaking-up party, and Beatrice looked forward with an eager, impersonal pride to the Music Master's first view of her. Beatrice possessed the impulse of the born Giver who loves to fling all beautiful and goodly things at the feet of the beloved. When she cared for people, she had a most impersonal desire to give them pleasure, whether through her own instru-

mentality or not; and as the sight of Hilda's face was pure joy to her, she would fain share it with the Music Master. No shadow of disaster was upon her as she met her friend in the perspiring throng of incoming guests, and raised her face with a little nestling movement to Hilda's cool, smooth cheek.

"How nice you look!" Hilda said cordially, and the tone ratified Beatrice's confidence in herself. "My dear, that white frilliness is most becoming!"

"I thought I was nice till I saw you," said Beatrice without flattery, looking up at the grave Greek profile and the rich colours in Hilda's hair and skin. "No one ever comes quite up to you, Apollo. I am so glad you have come! I want to introduce you——"

She looked across the throng of fat parents and thin parents, of over-dressed pupils and fagged-looking teachers, to a corner where she had already caught sight of a shorn fair head and an immaculate white collar. The Music Master was sometimes careless in appearance, but he was never dowdy. To-day he was irreproachable and a little overpowering, so that Beatrice, remembering last night, had allowed her shyness to overtake her again and had not yet spoken to him. As she looked, the elation which was keeping her at the fever point of excitement faded a little, and for the first time that day she felt tired. He was talking to a friend of his own —a lady who was not very young, but whose appearance stamped her as of a very different grade to the other guests. She was indeed a private and intimate acquaintance of the Music Master's who was present on his account as much as Hilda's on Beatrice's, and her quiet, well-cut gown and rather quizzical expression gave Beatrice a sudden feeling of being outside the

pale. She had always recognized that the Music Master was by no means the usual type of teacher in a school of this class, but she had not also realized that the women of his world were also a type that had as little affinity with her as with the school. Her expression hardly altered as she looked at the couple across the room—it simply went out of her eyes altogether, and left them blank. She knew, from the set of his shoulders though his back was towards her, that the Music Master was in a black temper; and it was as evident that the lady was rallying him. Beatrice turned rather suddenly to Hilda.

"Not now," she said. "Another time. Come into the refreshment-room, and have some tea."

Hilda followed as if nothing had happened. But the Greek mask rarely betrayed any emotion unless a storm of anger coloured it more fiercely. An experience of her own, that was even now altering her life, had quickened her understanding to a point which seems like some spiritual communication between women.

Beatrice's gift was emphatically the social gift, above and beyond those artistic qualities which made life a fine torture to her rather than otherwise. Even in such an assembly as the school breaking-up, her instinct made her a charming personality which stood out against the drab efforts of other mistresses and the *gaucherie* of the guests. There is always pleasure in doing a thing well and being at one's best, and though the material was so poor, she would have got some little enjoyment (which her sense of humour would have helped) upon another occasion, merely through talking with the parents of her pupils. But the Music Master had somehow contrived to throw his shadow upon her even across the room, and though she was still instinctively the born hostess, she made her little success with a pin-

prick at the heart. She had hoped, dimly, that he would have sought her—that last night's attraction would have been strong enough to draw him through the prudence of daylight. But the afternoon wore away without their speaking or coming in contact, and he remained by the side of his unknown friend, obviously ill tempered and out of humour with himself and the world.

"If he doesn't like being with her, why does he stay? It can't be very pleasant for her, if he is in one of his moods!" thought Beatrice innocently. She was standing near the couple at last, though they did not see her, a friendly curtain partially hiding her white figure and the face that had lost its joy and began to look weary. She had avoided him rather than otherwise up till now, for her pride was a thorny hedge round her; but the rooms were growing empty, and she had drifted into his neighbourhood unconsciously, until she was near enough to hear what he and his companion were saying.

"What a dreadful life!" the lady remarked, her glance, half amazed and half amused, taking in the exact class of pupil and parents. "The surroundings must be impossible. I wonder you have stood it for so long."

"I am not going to stand it any longer," said the Music Master savagely—Beatrice recognized his tone as the one that followed many false notes—"I will get out of this next term, if I have to break stones by the roadside."

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said the lady with a tolerant smile. "What has made you so desperate?"

"Oh, I've played the fool! What can you expect in such surroundings? They are impossible, as you say. I was driven into the nearest diversion at hand. I must say I was not the only one who was willing to amuse myself; but there

is nothing to do now but bolt for it unless I want a millstone round my neck for life."

Beatrice put a trembling hand up to her lips with a childish idea that she should find them burnt and seared—last night's kisses seemed to scorch them so. She had not thought of this—there had been no definite end to the delirium of her happiness—the coarseness of the man's point of view stung and lashed her like a whip. She had turned to the love for which she yearned as simply as a flower to the sun, and her very incapacity to have any further designs (such as being a millstone round a man's neck, for instance, as an undesirable wife) had blinded her to such a conception. The blow hit her as straight and true as if he had planted it between the wounded brown eyes. She held her breath for an instant as she drew herself back—slowly—stealthily—out of reach of their discovery, and, turning, slipped through the rooms to Hilda's side.

"Are you tired? Would you like to go now?" she said abruptly.

Hilda turned as if to a stranger. Perhaps she did not at the moment recognize the usually musical tone in which Beatrice was voiced for her; but, having turned, she drooped her grave face a little in a way that was peculiar to her, bending to Beatrice from the neck but not stooping, and so looked at the white mask presented to her in profile.

"I thought you wanted to introduce me to some one?" she said quietly.

"Oh! I am sorry—I am afraid I can't. I can leave now—if you don't mind coming."

"I shall be glad. Do I say 'good-bye' to anyone?"

"Only to the Head-mistress. I must speak to her myself. Please follow me."

The words came as if ground out of some small

creature in deadly pain, but Hilda asked no questions. That present experience of hers was teaching her an intuition she could never otherwise have gained. Some women learn to help each other, always through pain. Hilda stalked beside Beatrice in silence when they had left the school, her taller frame swinging along to the younger girl's quick walk—a much quicker walk than Beatrice's usual one. Once Hilda made a passing remark about Nous Autres, and Beatrice answered with sudden savage rudeness. She turned upon her friend with flaming eyes, and spoke with curt sarcasm, as though the subject had long been a grievance to her. Yet all she had been asked was whether she had heard when the next meeting was to be!

"The pain is getting beyond her power to bear," thought Hilda. "What *shall* I do?"

At Beatrice's door she paused, trying to decide what was best to do. In Beatrice's place she would have been better left alone—it would have been the only thing for her; but Hilda was seven times stronger than Beatrice, and a lonelier spirit. She judged by herself, and held out her hand to say good-bye.

"I must be getting home. Good-bye, old girl; come round and tell me the result of to-morrow's trial," she said.

"Yes. Good-bye." Beatrice still spoke as if the sentences came with a wrench. Then suddenly she put her hands up to her shadowy eyes. "Oh, my head, my head!" she exclaimed, pressing her fingers to her temples as Magda did. "No, it's nothing. Only a headache. Leave me alone; I shall get better."

Hilda turned away as the door closed after her, respecting her solitude. Beatrice stumbled up to her rooms—the same rooms she had dressed and dreamed in not twelve hours since! They

looked strange to her, and she wished with a shudder that Hilda had forced herself in and stayed for a little while, talking.

"I should have been rude to her if she had suggested it," she owned to herself in the same breath, with a panic of fear of her own lack of control. It is a law among Nous Autres that they shall not be rude to each other, hardly even in jest, and if any one breaks it she is tacitly set outside the pale until she knows her own enormity. Beatrice did well to be frightened, for even the excuses due to ill-health or extreme trouble were not extended beyond a certain point.

She sat down in the ugly little sitting-room that had suddenly become a dreadful place. Last night the hard, black leather that upholstered it had not mattered; and somebody had sat in the armchair who had seemed a friend at least—her shamed lips said a lover as they burned with remembered velvet touches—and who was suddenly an enemy. . . . *"I have played the fool . . . I was driven into the nearest diversion at hand . . . there is nothing to do but bolt for it, unless I want a millstone hung round my neck for life!"* She could still hear the cruel, clean-shaven lips and their soft, discontented drawl, while her eyes stared at the empty armchair as if the head of Medusa hung there. It was all so ugly—so sordid. She herself was so cheapened . . . and last night she had thought it a beautiful and radiant thing, as sweet as sweet carnations, as warm as the touch of living lips and the clasp of masculine arms. . .

There succeeded another sleepless night, which she did not remember much. Towards morning she fell into an exhausted unconsciousness, for she had gone to bed supperless, too sick to eat, and the insufficient food, and excitement, of the

past twenty-four hours were treading heavily upon the wear and tear of the term. When she woke next morning the glass showed her a haggard face with unnatural dark eyes and drawn lips, and she laughed at it hideously.

"After all, it is not much to attract a man—he had more to offer!" she said to the grim reflection. "*I must say I was not the only one who was willing to amuse myself!*" That is what he thinks of me.—Well!"

She turned from the glass, and began to prepare listlessly for going out. The trial of voices was to come off at the theatre that morning, and she must go, though her body seemed to ache for lack of rest and with the mental trouble. She would not look in the glass again before leaving the house, lest it should discourage her; but after swallowing a cup of tea and some bread and butter, she made her way out into the steamy July morning. There was little ozone in the parched streets, but Beatrice, who loved the free sky over her head, lifted her face instinctively to the open air and revived a little. She walked most of the way through a mechanical economy, forgetting that she should save herself for the coming effort; and, like all highly nervous and sensitive people, her mind declined to be detached from the feverish trouble that was consuming her, but with refined self-torture dwelt on each sting afresh. The Music Master's face danced before her tired eyes with its contempt and impatience of his surroundings—of which she had become the greatest drawback.

If he had only known that she was going to leave! If she could only convey to him without making the admission pointed! Her hurt pride writhed as she thought of his own haste to resign his post, to get out of the embarrassment of her presence. He was afraid he should find himself

forced to marry her. . . . Poor Beatrice! And she had loved him! . . .

She got down from the omnibus where she had taken refuge for her tired limbs, at Charing Cross, and began to thread her way in and out the crowd in the Strand. She was beginning to feel faint, and speculated as to whether it would not be wise to go into a chemist's and ask for a dose of sal-volatile, a remedy known to her in overwrought, hysterical attacks. Then a second idea occurred to her. Why not buy the means of escape, even though she had no cause to use them? The very possession of such an infallible remedy would give her a sort of confidence to face life afresh. If she could say, "I need not go on with it," she knew she would go on with it; but in any case the impulse to destroy herself was but half-hearted. Beatrice, as the Music Master had said, had her own instinctive pose, though she was her only audience. In this case she was acting to herself, and by some curious process of mind it was a consolation to her to see herself so desperate that she was actually buying poison to hold in reserve if she found existence unendurable.

She was a little afraid of herself as she entered the first chemist's, for she had never asked for such a thing as a drug before; but her own composed manner reassured her, and as she only wanted a small quantity, the man did not seem suspicious. A little further she turned into a side street and did the same thing; then once more in the larger thoroughfare, and with the three small phials hidden in her breast, Beatrice was satisfied. It was a clumsy way of making preparation, certainly, but it answered its object, for it created Beatrice's desired effect.

She was by no means amongst the first girls to arrive at the stage door of the Sovereignty Theatre, but the manager, who was to hear them

sing, had not yet arrived. Beatrice found herself amongst a dozen other aspirants who were standing in the little lobby and the dark passage, and grumbling at being kept on their feet for hours before they sang, there being nowhere to sit. The place was hot and stuffy, and the various scents used by the girls were overpowering; they themselves were of a class that Alma knew well, but which was new to Beatrice, used to the severe neatness of governesses and unaccustomed to the cheap finery of the stage. Most of the faces around were pretty, but with a prettiness that hurt one at a near view, for the truly effective stage face must be exaggerated to be successful on the other side of the footlights. They were smartly dressed on the whole, in an overdose of the prevailing fashion; but the edges of their gowns were mostly soiled and frayed, and they were by no means particular as to the details of their appearance. Nevertheless, their chatter distracted and amused Beatrice, and for the first half-hour she forgot to be tired in listening to the language of this new world in which she might find herself.

"I've been here since ten—two whole hours wasted, and I'm dotty with tire!" said a voice next to her with a strong Cockney accent. (Beatrice shuddered to think what the *singing* voice must be like.) "Old Sam is crool to keep us like this—crool!"

"Hulloa, Daisy, dear old girl! How are you? I haven't seen you since the 'Mermaid and the Man' went out. Are they on the road still, Kiddie?"

"Yes; but I left. I couldn't stand fit-up. It doesn't pay a bit—it's a frost. They're doing fearful business!"

"Who's trying us to-day? Moritz?"

"Yes. Old Sammy—he's a beast!"

"He's a giddy goat, too. He got Vera Lardy——" the voices sank to an ecstatic whisper, and Beatrice received no more hints on the character of the gentleman who was shortly to decide her fate. She could not see the speakers, but a girl with a handsome, Jewish type of face, immediately in front of her, spoke next and loudly.

"I say, porter, are we never going in? We've been here for the last week!"

"Yes, and you'll be here for another until Mr. Moritz comes!" said the doorkeeper roughly. "Who's that trying to pass through? Come back, miss, please! There's no going on till I tells you!"

The girl who had been venturing too far into the bowels of the pitch dark theatre was herded back, grumbling, and the increasing crowd began to quote a time-honoured phrase in pantomime, more particularly when it happens to be "Cinderella." There always comes a point in this classic production when the two Ugly Sisters want to go up the grand staircase to the ballroom, and the powdered footmen stop them on account of their unusual appearance. (As they are invariably taken by men in low-necked gowns, there appears some reason for the footmen's objection!) The girls saw a similarity between their own position and that of the Ugly Sisters, which tickled them into hilarity.

"'Pa says that we're to go up!'" quoted some one, and it was taken up across the lobby and passed down the passage.

"Pa says that we're to go up—up—up—up—UP!" And then, to the tune of "The Campbells are comin'," "Up—pup—pup—pup—pup—pup—pup—pup—pup!"

ad libitum, while the doorkeeper fumed and snorted impotently for silence.

Beatrice laughed in spite of sore feet—for the waiting tried her more than walking, though she began to be conscious also of that false economy of hers in saving the omnibus fare—and looked round her as to the new comrades of a new life. It promised to be even less refined than the second-rate schools to which she had grown drearily accustomed, but in her reckless unhappiness she felt she did not much care. It was life and movement, anyway—common, vulgar vitality in preference to the stagnation and narrowness that had driven her nearly mad. Besides, there was a certain comradeship amongst these girls, a give-and-take, a good-natured, rough sympathy that softened their more glaring defects for Beatrice. She did not realize how much she was counting on sharing their novel existence, or how she had taken it for granted that Providence would be merciful and fling open the door for her escape, once she found life insupportable under its present conditions. That there is usually no escape from life, and that the grim prison walls will be the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever, with not even a choice of a worse exchange, is a very final knowledge, and seems nearly inconceivable to the young.

At last a stir amongst the foremost girls showed that something was happening in the theatre; there was a forward pressure—a babble of voices—some one being moved on. But Beatrice hardly heard in detail. She had a general impression of such intense tire as sapped brain-power and nerve-power alike. She was physically sick, and a band of pain crushed her head just above the brows; but she still thought that she could sing. The girls were moving on now in twos and threes so that she was herself

at last in the passage, and from the unknown beyond the sound of a piano lost in space came wandering up in snapped lines of songs that she knew, to the notes of more or less unequal voices.

"Lay by my side your bunch of purple heather"—

"Ev'ry morn I bring thee violets"—

"Where's the music that is half so sweet—
Tararan ta ta! tararan ta ta!
Tararan ta ta ta!"—

Then the bar seemed invariably and abruptly broken off. How little they were allowed to display of their powers! Yet even now she did not calculate the immense competition implied by that crowd of girls, or the rough lines on which successful candidates were chosen. Only the coarser and very powerful voices could stand the strain of the long wait without food or rest. Those girls who sang with any delicacy or a better timbre of voice, found that their notes cracked, and were briefly dismissed. In a way the management was correct, for such voices as would not stand wear and tear were of no value in chorus, and the sifting of the girls by means of the physical strain to which they were put was useful in showing who was fitted for the work.

"When we are married—
Oh, what will you do?
I'll be as sweet as I can be for you!
I will be tender,
And I will be true—
When I am married, sweetheart, to you!"

Ah! there was a better trial—evidently this girl was more to the judge's taste, as she was allowed to sing through to the end of the verse. There seemed a longer pause than usual after she ceased, and then Beatrice found herself moving on with

two or three others, until she emerged suddenly on to the bare boards of the stage, the sudden light of two or three flaring gas-jets making her blink like a young owl after the dark passage.

There was a piano standing down by the unlit footlights, and a lean man with flat hair and no chin to speak of was sitting there listlessly, as if weary of hearing the victims ticked off, and of playing a bar or so of accompaniment for them. The Manager himself—"that beast Samnty!"—was a fat and greasy person, whose face made Beatrice shrink a little. It was not that he was obtrusively dangerous—the loose, sensual mouth was not very visible under the ragged moustache—but he was so wickedly unclean, both physically and mentally, that it was impossible to forget this characteristic for a moment. She came forward into the glare of gaslight with a sudden sense of inappropriateness, and the Manager looked up sharply and stared as if he felt it also. Amongst the over-dressed, bare-necked young women with their faces made up to at least a semblance of prettiness, Beatrice's slim dark figure looked like a ghost from another world. It had not occurred to her to wear anything unlike her usual quiet clothes, or to alter her hair or her hat—though had Alma accompanied her she would have seen that her personal appearance should not at least tell against her. As it was, her dark clothes seemed like a blot against the silks and muslins whose soils did not betray themselves in the theatre, and for the rest her appearance had the ghastly effect of her tire and the troublous events of the last few days—a colourless face wedged in a vast weight of hair that was nothing but dusty shadow, and two eyes a great deal too big for the face. It was no wonder that the Manager stared! He seemed, indeed, so doubtful of her right to be there at all,

that Beatrice mechanically held out the card sent her by the agents to whom Alma had introduced her, and which requested her to be at the Sovereignty Theatre at 12.30 to have her voice tried. It was, by the way, just three hours later than the time specified.

"All right," said the Manager curtly. "Have you brought a song?"

Beatrice opened the rolled music in her hand, but still without speaking. Her silence added to her uncanny appearance, but sudden nervousness had taken her speaking voice away, and though still quite sure she could sing, a panic possessed her lest she should not remember the words of her song. It was "A May Morning," which Nous Autres had unanimously advised as showing her pure, true notes in the upper range of her voice; but her brain teased her instead with scraps of Flair's verses, so that her hands trembled as she gave the crumpled music to the indifferent accompanist and watched him roll it out with fascinated eyes.

"His Majesty's ship the *London*
Was first of the fighting line—
Ten ships of war where the Fastnets are,
And thirty feet in the brine.
And His Majesty's ship the *London*
Spoke out to the other nine."

All the while the verse jigged in her head the accompanist was playing the introduction, and Beatrice was searching her brain for the right words—literally searching, for "His Majesty's ship the *London*" drove everything else triumphantly before it.

"His Majesty's ship the *London*
Was first of the fighting line—"

Suddenly she heard the accompanist half pause, hang on the bar, and realized that he was waiting

for her. Beatrice caught her breath, raised her head mechanically, and began to sing in a husky, flat tone—

"Come out! come out, my dearest dear—
Come out and greet the sun."

Her voice cracked, and she stopped blankly, even before the Manager's monotonous "That will do, thank you!" He had said the same to fifteen girls already, who were weeded out by tire and strain.

Beatrice turned away in the same mechanical fashion; but as she did so the realization of what this meant struck her with sudden vivid consciousness, like a physical blow. Her need for escape seemed to her desperate, and this fat man with the greasy skin was denying it to her with others to whom it meant no more than a passing disappointment. As if driven by her own necessity, she stopped, her crushed music in her hot hands, and faced him again like a creature at bay.

"Would you tell me——" she began with stiff, dry lips that she had to moisten before she could even go on. "Is my voice of any use on the stage? Should I ever get taken on?"

There was pleading in her heart, but it was her tragic Fate that she could not give way to her own emotions at the moment she wished. A long training in self-repression had resulted not in self-control, but in the mere habit of disguising all emotion. Had she had real command of herself, she would have been able to convey some hint of what she was feeling in the crises of her life; as it was she merely seemed hard and matter-of-fact—perhaps a little self-assertive—to the Manager.

"No," he returned, with off-hand brutality. "No chance at all, I should say. You may be able to sing at home—pretty little drawing-room

voice, no doubt—but you are no good to me. I want power and some training. It's mere waste of time hearing voices like yours. Next, please! "

Beatrice walked quietly off the stage and back into the passage again. She intended to pass through the lobby and out into the street, but some one had at last persuaded the porter to put one or two chairs for the weary applicants, and one of these was empty at the moment. Beatrice sat down in it almost without intention on her own part; she did not feel faint, and she was not in the least hungry, though at one time during the standing she had felt that she would drop for want of food; but it seemed suddenly that all power of volition left her. She sat down quietly, unobserved by the girls who were still crowding and chattering, and waited.

She realized at last what this meant to her—a closed door shut on her frantic wish to escape, not now only, but for ever. For she accepted the Manager's fiat as final, and had no spirit at the moment to fight against it. No doubt the lack of food, and tire, and the reaction from excitement and worry—a dozen physical reasons, indeed—were benumbing her mind; but for the moment she was incapable of rising against her troubles, and her recuperative power had gone. All she knew was that there was no escape for her, she must go back to the dead level of the life that had grown intolerable by reason of the Music Master. She looked on into the future, and saw a procession of ink-stained tables and underbred boys and girls, herself at the head of them growing older and less desirable, first youth and its possibilities leaving her, and then health, and then the desire of life; until she was pronounced too old for work, and drifted shabbily along to the workhouse, unless some charitable institution staved it off sufficiently for her to drag

out her existence in one pinched room in a cheap neighbourhood. The last was the best that she could hope, unless she were so unspeakably lucky as to die with the blood still beating warmly in her veins, with youth and its stormy pains and pleasures making the world coloured instead of drab. Sometimes, you see, the half bred hunter looks forward to the knacker's day as better than the cab-sores and the heart-break.

It was twelve when Beatrice entered the stage-door of the Sovereignty; it was just on four when she left it. She walked blindly down the Strand, keeping her feet mechanically, and crossed Trafalgar Square, drifting along Pall Mall, and making by instinct for Waterloo Place and Piccadilly. Somewhere west she knew that there were open spaces, and green grass where one might lie down and dream of sleep. She turned her face, as a thirsty animal will towards water, to the stretches of the parks, and scented the trees and the quiet earth. The foot-passengers along Piccadilly hardly saw her gliding by, a delirious personality, fever-struck with life, and only going towards the healing of the open spaces by the same instinct as the sick animal.

As she dragged her feet along the railings of the Green Park, looking for an entrance, her breath threatened to fail her, and she laid her hand on her breast to still the heart that fluttered there like an imprisoned bird beating its wings. Then her slight, groping hands chanced on the little phials thrust under the loose folds of her blouse for safety, and she remembered. . . .

Here was the escape, purchased by herself without real intention at the moment, but now become a merciful chance of release. She linked her small hands carelessly before her, dropping them from her breast with the cunning of the maniac who fears to betray a hiding-place, and

sauntering in at the open gateway, made her way out of the beaten track, and, stepping over the low rail, crossed the grass. It swept her ankles, cool and soft, and she walked slowly, and more slowly, partly for the childish pleasure in feeling it, partly to find the green resting-place where she might sleep. Twice she turned to avoid the curious looks of passers-by, and finally she sat down at the foot of a wide-branched tree, and, resting her back against the trunk, listened to the drone of the traffic in Piccadilly. It swept on and on, monotonously carrying with it the lives of such as herself—men and women who started hopefully, meaning to make a good fight of it, but gradually wore down their hopes in the struggle, and were still borne on on the impulse of the tide of life without will or wish of their own. It was drifting past her now—drifting past. She, at least, had found a green bed where she might sleep. . . .

She had taken up her position so that the broad tree stood between her and the gravelled walk, but there was no undergrowth to screen her—nothing but the deep rise and fall of the grass slopes, and the elms stretching out wide branches at clear intervals; and though it merely looked as if she had sat down to rest on the grass in preference to one of the hard, hot seats on the gravel, still it behoved her to be careful. She opened the little phials and drank the contents cautiously, when no one was passing by. The sickly taste of the drugs was hard to swallow, but that was all the difficulty. It seemed an easy thing to accomplish her escape, after all.

"I have sent in my Resignation," said Beatrice, looking half curiously round her at the world that throbbed with life and light and sound. "We are not competent to undertake such a

responsible post as God seems to assign us,—Nous Autres!"

Had Beatrice been older, she might have weathered the storm and drifted into the apathetic acceptance of pain which kept Flair Chaldecott alive. But Flair's experiences of a like nature—disappointment, discouragement, weariness, despair—had been a succession of tragedies that followed each other singly through her youth, and with which she fought, without hope, in turn. Beatrice's, perhaps mercifully, came all at once and overwhelmed her with one short, unbearable period.

She sat quietly on the green grass and listened. Beyond the park railings was the mighty, incessant hum, the swing of London going by, and going by, while one of its victims dropped out of the struggle and fell asleep. Yet there was nothing to tell of a tragedy. A long, grassy reach, fretted with dusty sunshine and the shadows of the burnt trees—a girl resting in the shade, with her head leaning against the bark of an old elm, and her dark eyes looking blankly out into the steamy evening. They were blank because Beatrice was not feeling at all just then; she was content to be there, out of pain. She had no desire to struggle for life against the drowsiness creeping over her, for the fear of realizing it all again and waking to that awful, vivid horror, kept her very still. She almost held her breath as though it were a material thing that might be roused out of the lethargy into which it had fallen.

A policeman passed her, and looked with faint disapproval at the slight girlish figure sitting on the grass. She had taken off her hat, and the abundance of her dark hair and her shadowy eyes were apparent to him even at the distance of his patrol on the gravel. He did not approve of

young women with such faces reclining on the grass. They were inevitably suggestive to the delicacy of a masculine mind, and the morals of the people cannot be too tenderly handled. Nevertheless, as she was respectably dressed, he let her be. Had her skirts been ragged, his duty would probably have pricked him into a gruff demand as to her business there. A space of turf is too luxurious a bed for the end of a tramping life. But during the summer the tendency of the public to sit on the grass has somewhat legitimized it, provided that they look quite as fitted to occupy the seats; besides which, Beatrice's youth led his thoughts in a different direction. He passed on and left her. . . .'

About sunset she died. She had fallen into a dreamless sleep long since, and the only alteration was the ceasing of the faint breath through her parted lips. Her pale face took a firmer mould and slowly set itself. Of all the responsible agents who had had a part in the making or marring of that sad little life, I doubt if one would have dared to have said a word of reproof then, had they been brought face to face with her marble fairness. But Beatrice's parents and guardians were as far removed from her in death as in life—farther even than the Music Master, or the theatrical Manager who had brusquely crushed her last hope. The lithe flesh and blood from which she had escaped lay there on the grass alone, a quiet denial of joy to herself or any human creature in the world. No covetous eye could soil her delicate roundness any more; no man desired that little, straight, soft body. Her failure was nothing to a world which only considers such things of importance as pertaining to a possible after success. London drifted by beyond the park, moaning to itself. Under the trees one of Nous Autres had done her best to

solve the increasing problem of what should be done with superfluous women.

. . . . . .

Three days afterwards Flair Chaldecott and Hilda Romaine identified the body, and made the necessary arrangements for its burial. Beatrice's salary for the quarter just covered the funeral expenses, and Flair handed it over to the officials. Then she went home and was very sick. Flair's nerves never answered to the required strain that was put upon them. Hilda did not play well on that evening either, and the conductor of the Ladies' Catgut Band seized the opportunity to vent his wrath upon her. It was seldom that his personal and private grudge against her of not appreciating his admiration had such a chance, and he felt much better for the reprimand he delivered in the face of the whole orchestra. The eyes with which she listened to his upbraiding were as dim as fading violets.

Beatrice's chair was not set in the usual corner when Nous Autres met. Franc shifted her seat a little that way, and the space was filled as well as possible, unless B.A. came down and swelled the decreasing number. The discussions lost a note of poetry, and the harmony wanted the silver string of its sweetest voice.

Providence, like other governments, sometimes seems to make mistakes, and binds too heavy a burden upon individual members of the community. Under such circumstances, the only honest course for those who feel that they cannot meet the responsibility thrust upon them, appears to be to resign. Beatrice Varley had sent in her resignation.

CHAPTER XI

"Wherefore on these the Fates shall bend
(And all old idle things—)
Wherefore on these shall power attend
Beyond the grasp of kings;
Each in her place, by right, not grace,
Shall rule her heritage—
Women who simply do the work
For which they draw the wage."

RUDYARD KIPLING.

FLAIR'S rooms measured about twelve feet by fourteen, and a good third of the space was choked up with papers. But their owner did not seem to feel that she was crowded out, and fiercely resented any attempt on Mrs. Bonnet's part to keep order for her—a thing that she never seemed to try to do for herself. Papers, as the rest of Nous Autres told Flair, attract both dust and beetles; but Flair remained unmoved by such warnings. She did not mind dust, and had a cockroach held out any inducement of becoming tame, she would have invited him to tea. Nothing that lived shocked Flair very much in itself, though the conditions of its breeding might strike her as too horrible to be contemplated. Not taking into account possible beetles, however, R. L. was the only person who was licensed to sit on her manuscripts or disturb them as he pleased, and with a fine disregard of possible masterpieces he made a bed of Flair's romances and a plaything of her verse.

One room—the bedroom—looked out over a sea of houses, the roofs rising and falling like waves, away to the ugly purple of the London horizon. Overhead the sky was white in fine weather—that smooth colourless white that one so often sees in England with a glare of light that is not

exactly sunshine. It inspired Flair with two lines that never grew into any consecutive description—

> "White skies of a sunless Summer,
> And the long straight veil of the rain—"

Flair knew those high white skies of summer as well as the yellow vapours of winter, for she rarely went out of town. The second room, where she ate and wrote and had her daylight being, looked out on to leads, and by throwing the window up as far as it would go, Flair could scramble out among the blacks and the chimney-pots, and see all London rolling by beneath. For her two attics were six flights up, and the leads of the next house jutted to a corner, and there, by a twist of good fortune, Flair could sit on a low parapet—if she did not mind smuts—and see Trafalgar Square through a blinking side street. It was a bird's-eye view, and not a good one at that (a photographer would have scorned it), but it was Nelson's column and one lion, a spray of fountain and a bit of pavement, while all day and far into the night the flood-tide of existence rolled and rolled and purred in traffic noises. When she was very tired indeed, nothing rested Flair like creeping through the window and along by the chimneys and so to the parapet, where she put her back against sun-warmed bricks and rested, sublimely indifferent to her old serge skirts and ink-stained blouses. Sometimes she borrowed Henley from a free library and read him there—

> "Trafalgar Square
> (The fountains volleying golden glaze)
> Shines like an angel-market. High aloft
> Over his couchant Lions in a haze
> Shimmering and bland and soft,
> A dust of chrysoprase,
> Our Sailor takes the golden gaze
> Of the saluting sun, and flames superb
> As once he flamed it on his ocean round—"

But I doubt if Henley, even, saw Trafalgar Square as Flair saw it.

On the day of Beatrice's school breaking-up, Flair went out on to the leads at sunset. It had been an intensely hot day, so that the heat seemed to hang above the earth and obscure the sunlight, but when Flair crawled out of the window among the smuts the atmosphere had cleared sufficiently to make the Square a dull gold—not the "golden glory, long-lapsing down a golden coasted sky," but sunshine filtered through mist. She had had her evening meal—bread and butter and lettuce, chiefly, because it was too hot to eat much—and had come out to allow the room to air. Flair always had a feeling that a room in which one had had food kept the odour of it, even though there was practically none to keep. But as far as her own share of ozone went she might just as well have stayed inside. The reek of the streets rose slowly, and was composed of stale vegetables and drying flowers and a horrible disinfectant which the London County Council or the Local Vestries were trying on the wood pavements. Flair sniffed as indifferently as a horse that knows its stable. London was as familiar to her in an olfactory sense as visually. She walked across the leads and out of the shadow of the chimney-pots into the pallid sunset, and there below her the carts and carriages swung past in a rhythm to which she wove romances. For it was as easy to Flair to endow the occupants of a passing barouche with life and history, as to read a novel. They were mere dots from this distance, but so much the more like puppets of which she pulled the strings.

After a few minutes she grew tired—Flair's body was generally flaccid, and lacked the spring of vitality—and sat down on the parapet, one hand dropped against the dirty stucco; and a

long, lean, black tom-cat found her there, and after prowling about for some scared minutes leapt up on her knee and lay down. He had surveyed her as an enemy, but she sat very still, and her eyes were the eyes of a lost friend. So as she did not even make the mistake of holding out her hand, he jumped up as he might have done on the parapet itself, and Flair stroked him gently. They were two strayed personalities, waifs in that London whose very essence seemed embodied in their quiet figures—a shabby girl with a languid face and eyes full of dreadful wisdom, and a shabby cat with every twitching sinew suggesting the life of the outlaw. He was a most disreputable cat, and the old scar on his nose was probably gained in a past battle with R. L. His very sleep was a wary one, and light enough to enable him to fly before the enemy he had always found to arrive before very long. This was probably the most domesticated hour of his life, and Flair's tired stained hand the only one that had ever smoothed his ragged black coat.

I often think that Flair must have been trying in a family circle, where she presumably lived at some period before she became a solitary tenant in the rooms off Duncannon Street; for a person who prefers to keep an amateur cats' home upon the window-sill, and becomes really ferocious if a single paper in an untidy room is properly dusted and straightened, cannot be regarded as a social character. Yet for the moment, dreaming among her chimney-pots above the golden haze of Trafalgar Square, there was something quietly homelike about Flair with her stray friend on her knee, and to her as well as to the cat the hour meant something—a pause in an overdriven life a certain gentle sadness in being glad to rest. She was probably as happy at the minute as she

would ever be, for she was in no actual pain of body or mind. She was so often ailing, that to be passively well seemed to her a thing for which to be very grateful, and though she had no actual joy of living, and no impetus towards activity, she was at least quiescent. An unexpected acceptance of a story, also, had lifted the worry from her mind secretly caused by her loan to Alma. Flair calculated, with a certain margin, that one spell of work would last her until another was finished, and to have her calculations thrown out by giving away half of a hard-earned sum shook her nerves for the coming weeks. She was not generous by nature, and to lend was an effort to her. Alma did her an unconscious service by forcing her to a wider virtue than her own prudence, while the knowledge of her debt to Flair kept Alma within bounds and taught her to painfully save. So they helped each other in this also. But the unexpected acceptance of a manuscript and the following cheque, had enabled Flair to see her way clearly again for three months, and she thanked God without words, for she prayed as naturally as she breathed.

Beatrice being at her breaking-up party, and Hilda with her, Flair had not looked for a gathering of the clans. But through a series of chances Nous Autres had an irregular meeting that night all the same. Flair was still sitting on the parapet when the black cat jumped down and vanished like a shadow, and guided by his finer hearing she got up and walked leisurely back to the window. When she reached it, she found Franc, smiling rather comically from the sitting-room, and evidently undecided as to whether any one could be out there on the leads.

"Hulloa!" she said cheerfully. "Mrs. Bonnet said you were here, but I thought you must have gone out unbeknownst."

"So I had," said Flair, standing outside the open window to chat.

"Yes, but I did not mean in the soot fields! Flair, you will be perfectly black!"

"I daresay," said Flair carelessly. "Shall I come in, as you are obviously afraid of smuts on your nose?"

"I came, in reality, rather to clean myself than to get dirtier. May I borrow a bath?"

"Certainly; go into my room and take what towels you want and the rest of the paraphernalia. The towels are in the cupboard which I use as a linen chest. I shan't come in for half an hour more if you are going down to the bathroom. I know you will lie and soak! I'll meet you in the committee-room by and by. Do you want something to eat, incidentally?"

"No, dearie. I have had a nondescript tea, with a plate of ham. I shall do very well till I get home, and mother will keep some supper for me, anyway."

The bright face vanished, and Flair went back to the parapet. But the black cat did not reappear, and after a time the light faded out of the sky and there was less to distract her thoughts. Flair never allowed her mind to dwell on the life she led, or those of her friends. She had a suspicion that if she did she would go mad. She had some vague ambitions for the future, and a store of splendid memories; and on these she lived.

By the time she had washed off the smuts and changed to a cleaner blouse, Franc had come out of the bathroom and was talking to another visitor of whose arrival Flair had not known. It was Magda, and the reason for her appearance was as much of a chance as Franc's. For she had been reporting at Lord's all day, and was in need of comfort. The authorities at Lord's do

not give seats to women reporters on small papers (Mágda was taking a chance order from a Lady's weekly to review and sketch the dresses), who nevertheless are bound to do their work thoroughly and see the match through; but they allowed Magda a pass at the gates which saved her a shilling each day, and she sat in the free stand between a curate and a working-man and learned more about the game than she would have done on one of the coaches drawn up against the rails. Both men were enthusiasts and knew their subject, and Magda was friendly. They told her so much that her account was surprisingly sporting, and the dresses took a second place in the letterpress. Nevertheless she went into the enclosure at the interval and made shorthand notes in line which no mortal being could understand but herself, but which eventually emerged into finished black-and-whites of no mean quality. To watch Magda work was a gasping education, and destroyed the most sacred convictions of the unalterable methods of a journalist. Three scrawled lines, a few cabalistic words appended as to frills and furbelows, and a memory beyond the price of rubies, made the foundation for a realistic representation of a fancy fête, or Messrs. So-and-so's spring goods. When she had finished with the promenade at Lord's she rushed off to get a bun and a glass of lemonade at the buffet under the stand, where she was half afraid to remain because of the company. It was the third day, and Magda stayed till stumps were drawn because she had a chance of a second paragraph in a "Special Edition," and dared not risk inaccuracy. The sun had beat on her head all day, and in spite of the parasol which other spectators good-naturedly allowed her because she had an end seat; and as she left the stand, with a word of thanks to her two friends, she

realized that she had been on duty for seven hours.

"Good-bye," said the curate, lifting his sunburnt straw hat. "It was a splendid game. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did."

"Good evening, miss!" said the workman. "I'm glad to stretch my legs a bit—it's a long sit, ain't it?"

"Good night!" said Magda, meeting the shrewd kindly eyes. "Thank you so much for all you have told me."

"Oh, I didn't tell you nothing!" said the workman with a shyly pleased laugh. He hesitated a moment, and then looked at Magda without the barrier of class. "You look fagged out," he said. "I've a daughter about your age, and I'd be sorry to see her sit in the 'eat all day to write for some bloomin' rag! We uses girls crool 'ard nowadays, it seems to me."

"*Your* daughter has something to be glad of, anyhow—a good father!" said April's Lady, with the quick tears in her blue eyes at the hint of kindness. She turned away quickly and ran down the steps, hurrying to get through the crowd. At the gate, however, she chanced on a man she had known during the office life in which her Editor was a standing personality—a man who was reporting on a Sunday paper, and was hot-foot for Fleet Street to get his copy in. Magda spoke to him at once, and asked him to take the brief notice she had written and leave it at the office whence the "Special" would be issued, as he passed, and which would save her the necessity of a cab. He took it good-naturedly, asked her even as they parted how she was getting on, and left her—free to go home and rest herself. As she stood hesitating on the pavement, wondering if train or omnibus would be the cooler this breathless evening, a gentleman

came leisurely out past her and hailed a hansom evidently engaged for him. He was lighting a cigarette, and pausing on the kerb before entering the cab, his eyes fell on Magda, pausing also for other reasons. He looked at her for a minute beneath rather cynically lowered lids—at the flushed tire of her face, the notebook in her pretty hands (she had not waited to put on her gloves), the fountain-pen hanging in its leather-case amongst the laces of her blouse. He saw the English blue eyes looking wistfully at the cabs and carriages carrying off their fortunate owners, and perhaps he guessed at her hesitation. Anyhow, he turned round and raised his hat.

"Are you by chance going South?" he said easily. "I am driving to Pall Mall, and I should be very glad to offer you a seat if you would like it?"

Magda looked up in amazement, hardly knowing how to deal with the invitation. It was pleasantly spoken, and he was not dangerous in appearance—a man who was not very young either, with a rather weary face, and quiet air of good living and good breeding about him. She remembered, with the faithfulness of a journalistic memory, seeing him in conversation with one of the coach parties, and wondering who he was. There was nothing offensive to take hold of in his manner, but there was a certain leisureliness—almost a langour—in both his voice and his movements.

For a minute she was going to accept. The rest and ease of the cab would have been merciful to her after the heat and tire, and she could ask him to put her down at Piccadilly Circus and go on from there to some friends whom she wanted to see. Why should she refuse a good offer? There was nothing against it—nothing. Except—

Magda had learned that no sermon is so well preached as an example. She had certain principles, which she had found necessary in life, and the rest of her friends knew that she held them and kept to them. There might be no harm in accepting a stranger's invitation to drive with him; Winnie would have done so for the deviltment of the thing—Alma likewise. Beatrice might have consented for the mere hint of romance and something out of the common in it. To Franc and Flair it would probably not have been offered. Hilda would have refused. But the point in Magda's mind was, not that her friends would have condemned it in her, but that it was a concession to licence. Nous Autres do not preach to each other (Flair's sermon being only gained by mutual demand), but they claim to be women who walk with clean feet through the streets of experience. The one who had said good-bye to them was Winnie. . . . Winnie was the first who had occurred to Magda's mind as sharing this stranger's hansom.

"No thanks," she said quietly, the eyes that were still a little moist from the workman's kindness threatening to fill again, half with the physical disappointment born of her tire, half because she felt the sharp contrast of the workman's daughter to herself. What would the father, who would not let his daughter overtax her womanhood even, have said to her being offered a ride because she was alone?

"I am going home," she said desperately, and walked swiftly away, leaving the stranger to think what he pleased. It is probable that he meant no harm by his offer, though he might have thought that there would be a certain novelty and amusement in the passing companionship of the girl to whom he had offered a lift. But supposing Alma, or Beatrice, or Franc should

have passed and seen Magda driving with him? At first she could have said he was a friend—but it was not her fashion to speak in generalities, or to lie.

So Magda went home by train; but half-way there she altered her mind, and feeling the need of comfort changed for Charing Cross. She had a much longer, hotter journey than she would have done had she gone straight home; but her housemate, Deb, was out to-night, and Magda was a gregarious animal and feared empty rooms. Flair at least would be at home; Nous Autres could generally calculate on that in the evenings, for Flair had no social life and went nowhere, save to an occasional theatre. She had discovered that a general acquaintance is a handicap to work, and that if she visited it meant not only the expense of better clothes, but took up time and was a hindrance. You cannot serve art and society. Flair worked really hard and faithfully, the only drawback to her plan being that to write one must first live, and she was simply drawing on her store of splendid memories and absorbing no new experience. By degrees her copy would become lifeless and not worth the paper it was written on, save from those living touches taken from her friends. As she hated the effort of going out, however, and found that it paid her best for the moment to stop at home and write, or read for the sake of writing, Flair was to be counted upon in her rooms, and Magda was not disappointed—more, she found Franc there, and rejoiced in the extra company.

"I'm expecting Alma, too," said Flair, as she dropped into the deck chair which she had brought down, and mutely invited R. L. to join her. "She is off on Friday with the Cottesmore Crowd; and is coming to say good-bye. Dined, Magda?"

"No—I'm starving. Flair, may I go up and find something to eat and bring down a chair?"

"Do. I'll stay and entertain the clean and shining Franc. I can see soap and water glistening in every pore!"

"That's because you are enviously dirty!" said Franc, settling herself in the only other chair that Flair had listlessly dragged down the many flights of stairs. "She was sitting on the leads, Magda, with so many blacks on her face that I thought at first it was the sweep taking a rest from labour among the chimney-pots!"

"Some one else was taking a rest, too," said Flair lazily. "R. L. can scent him now—there was a most disreputable old tom who came and talked to me. Don't be silly, R. L.! I have no doubt he is an intimate friend of yours. It's absurd to pretend I have consorted with strangers."

But R. L., with a ringed paw on her knee, sniffed fastidiously. In spite of the summer his own coat was watered satin compared with the black cat's. "I don't like the smell of him!" he said plainly, and dropped his paw from Flair's knee without jumping up. We have to pay by our established loves for following wandering fires.

"I call that mean!" said Flair, lighting a cigarette to console herself. "And you scratched him on the nose—you know you did!"

"Vulgar beast!" said R. L., and went and sat on the bare table in the window, lashing his tail. He was always haunted by a dread, which besets an adopted pet, that Flair would take another stray into her capacious heart, and he should be ousted. Had he been a pampered kitten, and owned by an adorer from the first, he would have had no doubts. One knows the air of a cat or dog who has been taught his own

value from birth, as well as the converted strays. But R. L. had had buffets in his life which had built him up a noble constitution, and spoilt his assurance. It was an anxiety of Flair's lest he should ever come to Ishmael's portion again, and she did not see how to guard against it. As long as she lived she knew that R. L. Stevenson of the black-tabby coat was sure of half her worldly goods; but—no life insurance office would have given Flair a policy, for which very reason she was not insured.

"By the way," said Magda, pausing on the threshold to watch the altercation with R. L., "what am I to eat, or to leave alone, Flair?"

"There is half a loaf of bread and some butter," said Flair thoughtfully. "Leave me enough for to-morrow's breakfast, that's all. And potted meat—and I don't think I finished the lettuce. You will find two or three eggs, and the saucepan and spirit stove, all in the right-hand cupboard. (Don't forget the water. Alma nearly burned the bottom out of the saucepan last time she honoured me by dining here!) And you can have marmalade if you want sweets. Do?"

"Beautifully!"

"Oh, and"—Flair looked at Magda's face with keen, sleepy eyes—"kindly oblige me by helping yourself to whisky and soda, and bring the rest down here. Tumblers are in the left-hand cupboard."

Magda departed, laughing, to refresh, and came back after some twenty minutes to find that Alma had arrived in the meanwhile. It was a scratch meeting, but they threw open the window and forebore to light up on account of the heat, and so smoked and gasped in the hot darkness for lack of better entertainment.

"Shall I send you a jar of potted meat, Flair,

or will you come and meal with me and take it all out together?" said Magda practically. "I believe I have borrowed two meals of you."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have eaten sixpennyworth of potted meat?" said Flair solemnly. "Because if so, I am afraid serious consequences will ensue. What *have* you been doing all day?"

"Reporting at Lord's. Don't be silly; I must pay you back, and I can't send less than a jar."

"But how will you manage about the rest of it?" said Flair teasingly. "You owe me at least three lettuce leaves, two slices of bread—if I know anything of your appetite!—a pennyworth of butter, and one of marmalade. The whisky and soda doesn't count, because you stood me some horrible drink the other day when we met at a report on that sale of Irish lace."

"It was an ice-cream-soda, and I will never give you another! It is base ingratitude to forget anything so divine!"

"I don't forget the consequences, anyway! I went to see my Doctor promptly, next day."

"Then you owe me a debt of obligation. You know you adore your Doctor, and would do anything for an excuse to go and see him."

"He and my Publisher are the only gentlemen whom I know," said Flair amicably. "When I feel doubtful of the term, I go and call on one or the other lest I should forget that such a thing exists. All the rest are Iffbaffs!"

"It's because you never go out. Why don't you make your own circle? It is dreadfully bad for you, living in yourself as you do."

"Because I hate the people I should have to know—the people in much the same class as myself, only a little better off perhaps. And if I could meet those who do interest me, they would be in an entirely different position to myself, and

that is an insuperable barrier. It is a great mistake to go out of your sphere."

"I don't see that you can go out of your sphere if you go into a better class of society," said Franc as abruptly as if she spoke with an effort. "You are simply educating yourself up to something above you. It's when you associate with a class below that the pinch comes." Dick, you see, had left his indelible mark—of humiliation if not of remorse.

"I agree with you, Franc. I don't mind knowing anyone who is above me in station—so called!—but I very much object to its being the other way." This was Magda, of course. "That is personal prejudice, but so long as I am a lady I see nothing to prevent my mixing with any class, and its doing me no harm."

"Well, I do," said Flair, with obstinate dryness. "For my own comfort at least. If you married a man who was well off and well connected, to-morrow, Magda, I should drop out of your life. I can't afford the luxury of a social acquaintance."

"Flair! Well, then, I should be very hurt and very angry. Why should you hold my friendship so cheaply?"

"Not cheaply, my dear," Flair answered a little sadly. "Only inevitably removed under such circumstances by the unwritten laws of civilization. We are outside the pale, *Nous Autres*, and as long as we remain Nous Autres we have no affinity with the men and women who make the world of the Real Girls. If you made such a marriage as I said, you would have different interests and a different atmosphere, and we should drift apart—that is all. I know that many women who may be classed among Nous Autres lead a very busy social life, and know a great number of people. But there is always a

certain Bohemianism on the underside of it, and their hostesses, I believe, hesitate every time they add their names to a guest list."

"Well, what can you expect?" said Alma with a gay shrug of her shoulders. "You ask a girl to your house when you give a respectable dinner party, and you send her down with a man who, last night, saw her having supper at Prince's about two o'clock in the morning! You must own that the situation has its charms!"

"That is just why I don't go out to supper, unless I have an older woman with me," said Magda practically. "But I grant that many women do it—and they are none the worse."

"No, but the fact remains that they are taking a liberty with social laws. If you think the game is worth the candle, and like such amusements better than the respectable dinner party, then I think you are quite right to choose for yourself. But I agree with Flair so far that I don't think you can quite combine the two lives. Personally, I prefer my liberty," said Alma with a little laugh that bubbled like champagne.

"But Flair doesn't go to suppers, and yet she will not try to get into the conventional groove she approves!" Magda protested in aggravated tones. "Her attitude seems to be this—'I am one of Nous Autres, therefore I am a Bohemian and unfit for society. But I hate Bohemianism, and so I shan't be even that!'"

Flair was saved defending herself by the arrival of another unexpected member—Hilda Romaine, who had come on from her experience at Beatrice's breaking-up, and dined on her way at the Roche. It had been a hot meal, and the atmosphere had offended her; but it was not only that that shadowed her beautiful face.

"You are just in time!" Franc said gaily. "Magda and Flair are about to tear each other

to pieces because they cannot agree about our social position. I'll run upstairs and get you a chair shall I, old lady? Come and sit in mine meanwhile, and pass judgment on the combatants."

"Don't trouble—the packing-case is good enough for me," said Hilda, seating herself thereon. "It is late, my children, and I am only shedding the passing light of my countenance upon you! I came in for five minutes to chat with Flair. What is the meaning of this conclave?"

"It's a 'Scratch,'" Flair explained briefly. "We didn't mean to meet. Franc came round to borrow a bath, and Magda dropped in because she wanted to quarrel with some one." (Magda shook her fist.) "And Alma came to say goodbye. She goes to-morrow for three months." Flair sighed below her breath.

"Good luck, Alma!" Hilda said kindly, "I hope you'll have a good time. What is the discussion on to-night?"

"We were talking about going out of our sphere," said Franc. "Flair says that if Magda married and went up in the social scale she should drop her!" There was a pause, because they were all waiting for a comment from Hilda, and for the moment she made none. Instead, her eyes turned to the dark of the open window, through which one could hear the occasional patter of feet belonging to some chance passer-by; and a sudden reserve seemed to have fallen like a veil upon her face.

"I do not think," she said at last, with an abrupt bitterness that vaguely startled her hearers, "that it is a subject that need trouble us, for none of us are ever likely to be asked to 'better ourselves' by marriage, as they so honestly say in the servant class. No man in a desirable position

could want us for wives with all our imperfections on our heads! It is much more likely that the office boy or the lift man would make us an offer, from the point of view that he was perhaps bettering *him*self!" she added, with a withering sense of humour that seemed to scorch her as much as any of her hearers. "And I am not sure under the circumstances, that it would not be incumbent on us to take him!"

"For the benefit of humanity and socialism!" said Flair, laughing. "Surely you are not going, Hilda! Why, you have only just come. Tell us about Beatrice's party."

"There is nothing to tell. It smelt of drapers' shops, and was cheap even down to the cakes, which had been made with saffron. Beatrice was the only thing there worth looking at, and when the butchers and bakers did not obscure my view, I refreshed myself with her.

"The frock was a success, then?"

"Beatrice was a success! The social instinct is so strong in Beatrice, that even with such poor material as a breaking-up party of that description she moulded it with the instinct of the perfect hostess. Wherever she was in the room the people about her felt pleased with themselves and their entertainment."

"I wish Beatrice could marry a duke and live in Park Lane!" said Alma regretfully. She was emitting radiance to-night from the irrepressible joy in her heart at the prospect of being on the Road again. Since her illness Alma had only been doing desultory work—"special weeks" and such-like—and she pined for the swing of a long settled tour. Three months at least stretched before her now, and in the glamour of her profession the very baggage-man and dresser seemed like friends to her. She was itching to be off, and already the smell of the Road was in her

nostrils—the dear irrelevant life with its movement and sense of adventure, even the narrowness of the Crowd which would bound her social horizon—that subtle world in itself which is stageland, and sets its votaries apart from any other. Some sense of this finds expression in the illimitable slang which makes the theatrical profession less understandable than any other, for they must have a language of their own to denote them a "peculiar people," and no dictionary standard will serve their necessity. Alma's only regret was that she should be away from her friends and beyond recall of them—more especially of Flair—until her contract ended, and in the fullness of her heart she would fain have endowed them all with impossible happiness like a fairy godmother.

"Even if Beatrice married a duke, she would never forget such an experience as to-day's, for instance," said Hilda slowly, her eyes on the memory of Beatrice's white face, and voice. "At the end she was tired, I think. Or something went wrong. Oh, girls, sometimes I feel that though I were left a fortune it would be no real good to me now! I should never get the chill of poverty out of my bones, as Magda says."

"No, we were born to attics, and it's better to keep to your sphere!" said Franc, in a dispirited tone. "The weather is making us all feel low, except Alma—let's break up. Do you come my way, Magda?"

They one and all hugged Alma before they left, however, and placed most of their possessions at her disposal "if she found she wanted them for the part." Flair walked down the passage with her to the hall door, and stood there for once to see them all depart, peering half curiously into the warm flat darkness of the night.

"What *are* you looking at?" Alma said

following her eyes. "Is there an enemy round the corner?"

"One never knows," said Flair drily. "I wondered if I had been indiscreet, and some one were sitting on the doorstep until you came out. How's the Big Man, Alma?"

"Very beautiful!" said Alma, with the simplest paganism. "He is coming to see me off to-morrow morning."

"Humph! just as well I'm not. Supposing he had turned up to-night, and the others had had escorts as well, I conclude you would have had to sort yourselves out before you started. There is generally *some* man hanging round Magda, and Franc has many friends."

"Hilda stands as aloof as you do," said Alma.

"Not quite," said Flair drily. The old fear dawned in her eyes, she shuddered and backed against the doorpost, glancing round her as if the Shadow had suddenly come into view. Even as Alma called a last good night and trotted after the others, who were in advance, the girl standing on the doorstep was looking with watchful, furtive eyes to right and left as if some dreadful danger threatened her from the quiet night.

"When I come back again," Alma was saying to Franc, "it will be autumn—perhaps it may be winter. I wonder if anything will have happened?"

And Franc answered, "No—nothing. We shall just go on being Nous Autres to the end of the chapter, and living the same life. It is only in books that women like ourselves come suddenly into a change of circumstances, name and fame and fortune; in real life the girls who work simply go on working."

"But there is an end, even to our chapter," said Magda.

"And things do sometimes happen," said Hilda, unknowing herself a prophetess.

"There's my omni," said Alma. "Good night, girls. Write and tell me if things do happen. Address to Alma Creagh—the 'Diamond Merchant' Co.—*on the Road*. Don't forget!"

CHAPTER XI

"She walketh veiled and sleeping,
For she knoweth not her power;
She obeyeth but the pleading
Of her heart, and the high leading
Of her soul unto this hour.
Slow advancing, limping, creeping,
Comes the Woman to the Hour.
She walketh veiled and sleeping,
For she knoweth not her power."—ANON.

IF it is not good for man to live alone, it is hardly more so for woman. Magda knew this from the vein of shrewd common sense that leavened the artistry of her nature, and took her friend Deb into partnership. Alma knew it also, and when she was on tour would share with another girl both from motives of economy and sociability, unless the "Crowd" were of the quality which Beatrice had sampled at the stage door. Franc had her mother, and Winnie had lived in boarding-houses; but Flair and Beatrice, the most morbid-minded of the group, indulged in solitude, and degenerated in their manners. Flair always forgot to pass the butter at meals, and slipped easily into the habit of reaching across the table for anything she wanted. Beatrice read while she ate, and spoiled her digestion, while her tendency to unpunctuality made terrible strides because there was no one to consider but

herself, and if she were at school at the appointed time, her home obligations were *nil*.

But it is to be doubted whether the drawback of being by oneself were in anywise bettered by the alternative of such a houshold as Hilda Romaine's. Hilda's life had a break in it to her own imagination, so that she saw it in two parts —the first, which was all white, bridged over to the second, which was all black, by the day when she came home from school to find that her father had married again while she remained in ignorance. Her own mother she had never known, but it was hardly wonderful that Mr. Romaine had concealed his second marriage from Hilda until it was an accomplished fact, for he was a weak man, and could as little face the beautiful set mask of his tall young daughter, as he could resist the vulgar, passionate woman who had married him. She had been one of the "showroom young ladies" in a large West End house, and retained a certain taste in dress that she called "stylish," and that intensified the stamp of ill-breeding upon her.

Hilda did not go back to school again. She remained at home to watch her father go slowly downhill, and to learn to keep a terrible silence through her stepmother's fits of ungovernable temper. The remainder of the household—including the quickly recurring children, who seemed to Hilda to punctuate her teens—were cowed by Mrs. Romaine, as the worst-tempered person in a family will to some extent always wear down the more peace-loving; but Hilda was never cowed, though as a rule she kept silence. Sometimes, at rare intervals, her own passion flared up in a flame that transcended Mrs. Romaine's more noisy methods, and left that lady with a virtuous sense of her own meekness compared with the threatening face which Hilda carried in her furies.

"Well, I'm glad at least that I have some control. I should be frightened to have a temper like Hilda's," she declared proudly. "If one of my daughters showed signs of such another, I don't know what I *should* do! The house wouldn't hold us all."

On an average, however, Hilda's curled lips were only a little closer pressed together during her stepmother's outpourings, and there was more of scornful irony in her blue eyes than an equal rancour. She did not openly quarrel with the woman for her weak-minded father's sake—she never had, from that first awful return when she found her installed as mistress of the house; and she was on easy terms with her stepsisters, who, however, were too far removed from her in age to be either companions or confidants. It was not only in social status that Mr. Romaine appeared to deteriorate after his second marriage; his means, always moderate, became involved through her love of display, or what she termed "keeping a good, showy house," and before she was twenty Hilda saw things become so desperate that she looked about for work in the little leisure left her from trying to supplement the inefficient service of the slovenly household. She had a fair knowledge of the violin, and at first she tried for pupils, with the usual disheartening result; and then she thought of the concert stage, but the agents flatly told her that she might wait for years before she got engagements, and her need was pressing. Hilda was by no means a genius; she had a reasonable amount of practical knowledge, and a love for music that was perhaps a talent in itself. At any rate, it gave her the perseverance to try to play well whatever she attempted, and the long patience of her work for eight or nine years was its own reward in a gradual mastery of her instrument. She was at least a great deal

too good a player for the work she found, though she might be no soloist. The same agents who had refused her concert work offered her the position of second violin in a Ladies' Orchestra, and Hilda took it thankfully and earned her first guinea by no means with ease, for her companions were as little to her taste as her home circle. She had played in many Ladies' Orchestras since then, and had seen as many ups and downs as the rest of Nous Autres—the most awful period in her memory being a bitter three months when ill-luck forced her to join a "Quartette" who were engaged during the Season in a tea-shop. The other girls were jealous of Hilda because of her face and the attention she unwillingly received from the young men who thronged the tables and stared at her through clouds of foul tobacco. Nous Autres used to rally round her in those days to mitigate her discomfort, and had tea so often at the shop that they became known as habituées more than the clerks and shopgirls of the neighbourhood. It was a period that did not bear thinking over even when it was thankfully past, and was not rendered sweeter by her stepmother's railing taunts and unvarnished criticism. Mrs. Romaine quite agreed in Hilda's working for her right to exist in an uncomfortable home, but she never lost an opportunity to sully the pride that she suspected by comments on the means to that end. Hilda struggled free of the tea-shop after a while, with two proposals to add to her education. One was from the manager of the place, the other from a boy in an office counting-house near by, whose wooing was conducted through the giggles of the other girls, they being privy to his suit, and assisting it by nudges and innuendoes to the best of their power. Fortunately for herself, Hilda was so tall that her storm-flushed face was easily lifted over his head;

but the grave Greek beauty grew shadowed with a look as of tragedy while the years passed on, each with its burden, making the likeness to the casts in the British Museum more defined.

The second trial of Hilda's professional career was another series of bad chances that landed her at last at an Exhibition with a self-styled troupe of Italians, whose Cockney accents and watery eyes betrayed a native right to Billingsgate rather than Venice. Hilda wore a red scarf over her bright hair and looked divine, but even the agent who got her the engagement was apologetic, and the very first "good thing" he heard of he honestly placed in Hilda's way. This was the Ladies' Catgut Band, in which she had played for ten months, and whose Conductor vented his hurt vanity upon her on the evening of Beatrice's burial. His fancy was really taken with Hilda's face, and his heart piqued by her indifference; but he was one of a long series of wearisome aspirants to her favour from whom the girl turned with disillusioned eyes. Hilda had always received attention, if merely of the turning of heads as she passed, and the succession of men who had gone a step beyond and contrived to express their admiration in words, she regarded as very little less than actual drawbacks in existence. "I am very strong," she had once said; and so she was—tenacious both of life and of some better fate for herself than what she had been offered, or she must long since have grown disheartened and drifted into a married life on as low a plane as her father's.

She never met men with whom she cared to associate, those visiting the house being naturally her stepmother's friends; and her companions of her own sex were Nous Autres. The only occasions on which she saw a better or more educated class were those when the Ladies' Cat-

gut Band was engaged to play for some soirée, or a big party at a private house. The position was not exactly desirable, because the guests, with questionable manners, would come and stare at the performers quite as rudely as the customers in the tea-shop had done: but they interested Hilda from an impersonal point of view, nevertheless. When even the other girls grew indignant, she could afford to laugh, something ludicrous in the position striking her irresistibly. Hilda's grim sense of humour had made life tolerable when a duller nature would have been goaded past bearing.

"They behave as if we were wild beasts! I saw one woman look at you, put up her eyeglasses, and say 'Quite pretty!' as though you were a doll and could not hear!" said the leader of the first violins to Hilda, red with wrath, as they compared notes during the interval which divided the programme in two halves.

"'If they think we are waxworks, they ought to pay,'" quoted Hilda. "But perhaps she really meant it!"

"Well, I should think she did!" (The first violin was a partisan of Hilda's.) "But you do take it coolly! I should be furious if I were you. The idea of their daring to tell you you are 'quite pretty' to your face!—and it comes to that."

"My dear, I care so little what they say, that even their bad manners do not shock me!" said Hilda with a little sigh. "Are we going to play the Julian Thorson to-night?"

"I don't understand you, Miss Romaine," said the other girl, staring with round eyes, and speaking quite honestly. "I have seen you go suddenly red when the Conductor was cheeky to you, as if you would like to kill him!"

"Perhaps I should; but think how foolish that

would be! We should all lose our engagements, and he would never understand what he had done —no, not even when he was dead! And, after all, when he is tapping round the music stand with his baton, he is all right."

"And yet you don't mind these strangers in the least!" went on the girl, not heeding Hilda's nonsense. "But in either case you are quite consoled if we play that Cavatina of Thorson's."

"Thorson happens to be my favourite English composer," said Hilda gently. "I love his harmonies so much that I can even afford to be angelic to the rest of the world when listening to them. I always fancy that we should be friends if we met."

"You'd be awfully disappointed," said the first violin, screwing the D string to a dangerous sharpness. "I hear he is quite elderly, and not at all English, really—his father was Swedish, I think. Lend me your rosin, will you? This bow won't bite."

Hilda leaned across the empty seat dividing the first and second violins, and handed the girl her rosin. The Conductor had already fled to refresh himself, and be congratulated on the performance of the girls whom he had left, with selfish indifference, hungry and tired, and waiting for their release. Sometimes it had happened that owing to an ill-managed concert, or some muddle of the arrangements in private houses, the Ladies' Band never left the platform at all, though they had twenty minutes' rest half-way through the evening. But it had never happened, in the memory of any player, that the Conductor had been in like case. Hilda heard the second violins grumbling behind her, but she was not personally so keen upon the weak lemonade and flabby sandwiches which she knew would be her portion in the cloak-room or a draughty passage behind the

scenes. She sat on the Conductor's immediate right as leader, and could talk to her *vis-à-vis*, the first violin, while he was out of the way. Furthermore, she was thinking of the music they were to play more than of her own appetite, for she loved her work, and all the desirable things of life to her were best expressed in her violin. One of the attractions to her of the Cavatina was that it was played with the mutes, as if afar off, and suggested all sorts of beautiful images to her mind—girls in warm-coloured silks playing at ball in a marble court—the exquisite rich architecture of an Eastern palace lifting the blue sky tent-like on its pinnacles—liquid sunset backing a tropical sea—all the ornaments of this hard, brown earth that mean visual beauty, for the which her soul longed. She would really have liked to ask the composer what he had thought about as he drew the refrain from the grieving strings.

Hilda enjoyed the semi-artistic evenings most, where the Ladies' Band had something amusing to look at, as well as being looked at in their turn. Nothing is more motley than a representative gathering of talented people, and Hilda's easily-tickled mirth made her shake with silent laughter over some of the men and women who were pointed out to her as "lions." They dressed, it seemed to her, in anything or everything inappropriate, and mostly soiled; and they gabbled to each other like parrots or monkeys. Now and then one saw a beautiful face or an exquisite gown, but how rarely! The notorieties seemed, on the whole, content to clothe themselves in fame.

"If Flair, or Magda, or Alma ever succeeds, we must be very careful with them at once, and crush any tendency in them to dirty draperies," said Hilda firmly to herself. There's a woman with a gilt laurel-wreath, and her gown wrongly

laced at the back. I hope Flair will not try to wear a laurel-wreath, even in her coffin! "

It was at one of these gatherings that Hilda realized her desire, and saw her favourite composer in the flesh. Julian Thorson was really a great man in his profession, and the principal guest at the evening function to which the Ladies' Catgut Band were contributing sweet harmony from a jungle of palms and greenery exceedingly trying to the performers, for Hilda's bow-hand was in danger of becoming entangled in a trail of smilax with every scherzo passage, while on the other side of the Conductor's seat the leader of the first violins sat in a bower of greenery, out of which her poor little face struggled vainly to see what she was playing. But the effect was very picturesque, and the hostess—a lady of some musical taste—was perfectly satisfied so long as Mr. Julian Thorson did not draw his brows together with the expression of anguish that made conductors tremble when he audienced one of his own compositions.

The whole affair put Hilda in mind of a ludicrous incident in "Nicholas Nickleby," where the entire company in a provincial theatre recognize a London Manager in the stage box, and immediately begin to direct all their energies at him. The hero made love at him—the heroine played her whole part at him—all the company neglected the exigencies of their positions and spoke simply to him—in the midst of which it was discovered that the London Manager was fast asleep! Hilda wondered whether Mr. Thorson would reward their efforts in the same way, for she was conscious that the entertainment was being run on something the same lines as Dickens' provincial theatre. The pieces chosen were those whose composers were known to be favourites of the great man, and the programme was abruptly altered

in order that the Cavatina might be introduced while he was still within hearing. With the corners of her mouth twitching, Hilda pushed aside a rampant fern in order that she might see what effect the last item—Sullivan's "Graceful Dance"—had had upon him.

He was standing in profile to her, being talked to by his hostess, to whom he appeared to be gravely assenting at intervals, but hardly contributing to the conversation himself. There was rather a contemplative air about him, and she thought that perhaps he really had been listening to the Sullivan before his hostess began to speak In spite of the first violin's warning, Hilda was not disappointed in her hero—for which rarest benefit of the gods she ought to have offered a special thanksgiving. Julian Thorson was a very tall man with square shoulders; his hair was grey and thick, and was long enough to wave without being unkempt—a great improvement on most of the male lions prowling around him! He wore an eyeglass on a black ribbon, with which he played as if the nervous trick were habitual to him, and for the rest he had a broad, generous forehead, and deeply set eyes which held the loving-kindness peculiar to short-sighted people. When he slowly turned towards the band, following some remark of his hostess, Hilda saw and liked the rather massive jaw and clean-shaven mouth. There was none of the sensuality usually to be discerned in the face of genius, but a great sensitiveness perhaps took its place, and made his contemplative regard of humanity somewhat paternal in its very gentleness. She judged him as a man nearer sixty than fifty, and was quite satisfied to have it so.

A minute later the Conductor rather impressively placed the Cavatina on the stand and began "tapping round with the baton," as Hilda had

too faithfully described his method of conducting. He frowned at the ladies of his band, who were still talking to each other under-breath, rapped the music, and with an exaggerated gesture started the first soft notes of Mr. Thorson's melody. Hilda could not see how the composer received the compliment, for her severely perfect profile was turned to the audience while she drew her bow clear of the palms, and as she bent above her violin her whole soul became absorbed in the music, to the exclusion of any external distraction. Owing to the necessity of the band being seated, it was impossible for her to look down and distinguish any one in particular among the muddle of faces and gowns and black coats grouped irregularly in front of the platform; yet through it all she had a certain strange feeling that she was playing solely for Mr. Thorson, and a little thrill of excitement made her young body tingle. The Cavatina's principal air was arranged, with an unusual preference, for the second violins, and Hilda at least threw her whole soul into it, playing her best for the quickening interest which possessed her. She was singularly unconscious for a beautiful woman, or rather she had grown so used to the impression she created, that she seldom thought about it unless it was forced upon her notice. During the playing of the Cavatina certainly she never remembered that she was more evident to Julian Thorson than he was to her; nor did it strike her that as he stood facing the whole band it was most likely that his eyes would be attracted to her face amongst all the others, as mankind always does search for and dwell upon the most pleasing object within sight, though by a partially mechanical impulse. The last few bars of a really creditable performance were making the Conductor swell with pride before Hilda Romaine turned her head and met

the full, kind gaze of the composer, experiencing a little shock of pleasure and surprise—for it was like meeting the eyes of a friend.

"Could you tell me who is leading the second violins?" said Mr. Thorson quietly to his hostess.

"I really don't know." She turned her programme to the list of names. "Miss Romaine, Miss Lysle, and Miss Thornton, second violins. There, Mr. Thorson, you are as wise as I am! A very fair rendering, was it not? I hope the second violins did not spoil something to your finer ears? To me it sounded quite lovely—but I have no doubt it was full of faults to the composer."

"Not at all, thank you," he said in the same quiet tone. "I have seldom heard it better rendered. I should like to thank the Conductor."

"Oh, certainly!"

But not only the Conductor was called up, swelling with a satisfaction that might have suggested the Cavatina to be his own rather than Mr. Thorson's, but the composer managed to speak a few words of courteous thanks to the ladies of the orchestra also, and in consequence they somehow felt themselves obliged to step down from the platform and receive his congratulation. He addressed them generally, it is true, but then he made a remark more particularly to the first violin, and left her for ever converted to his worship, whether he were of Swedish birth or no, for he had a very charming manner; and then—then somehow he was standing next to the tall girl whose name he had inquired, and turned quite naturally to speak to her also.

"I am afraid you must be very tired by the end of the entertainment," he said gently.

"Not more than other orchestras, I fancy," Hilda returned with a little low laugh that was

half cynical. "We usually arrive with the ices and go away with the red cloth--but I am thankful to say I have never actually seen the red cloth laid! So there is something for which to be thankful."

He looked at her with an intentness that she would have resented in nine men out of ten. "And may I not get you some refreshment now?" he said easily. "If you have been playing for three or four hours——"

"Oh, no, thank you!" she said hurriedly, shocked that her dry little speech should have resulted in this. "We shall go out and have some lemonade some time, I expect. There is generally one interval longer than the rest, during which the orchestra refreshes."

He did not press the matter, but stood talking to the first violin and to Hilda herself in a desultory fashion, swinging his eyeglass on its black ribbon. And perhaps his notice had this much effect, that the hostess remembered the existence of the orchestra as human beings and not mere machines, for soon after they were trooped off and regaled by themselves, as if they were in some sort social lepers, who might not mix with the rest of the guests. Hilda caught sight of Mr. Thorson at intervals throughout the night, now the centre of a group, now chatting to a single person who was important enough to engross his whole attention, and she always found his manner charming, even viewed at a distance. Once, also, towards the end of the performance, she met his eyes again, and they looked at each other with a kind of impersonal sympathy that made her feel as if she had gained a friend, though she never expected to do more than pass him in a crowd on some future occasion—perhaps not even that.

Their second meeting was as unexpected as

Magda's experience of her Editor. Hilda was walking fast along Oxford Street a week or so later, on her way home after a wearisome rehearsal, when she suddenly found herself in the centre of a street accident. There was a horse down, and the hope that some one was hurt had gathered the spectators so quickly and so fast that before she could push her way through, the girl felt herself jostled into the thick of it, and jammed against other foot-passengers without being able to help herself. The gentleman next to her, pressed with her shoulder to shoulder, might be as anxious to proceed as herself, but for the moment neither could help the other, and, looking round to apologize, Hilda found her eyes caught by a familiar face and a big grey head somewhere above her own. It was Julian Thorson, but she thought he was less likely to recognize her than she him.

"I am so sorry that I can't move, but the stout lady behind me is butting me towards you, I think," she said gravely.

"It is really not my fault that I am in your way," he began in the same breath, but waited for her sentence, and then laughed.

As their eyes met, Hilda hesitated and said, "I think it is Mr. Thorson——?"

"And I know it is the second violin in the Ladies' Band who rendered my Cavatina so perfectly," he said easily. "I was quicker at recognizing you than you were me, you see, though I never learned your name!"

Hilda smiled her wise little smile, holding her head back from its proximity to his shoulder, while the stout woman behind her prodded her way vigorously and forced them into each other's arms with embarrassing success.

"What *is* your name?" said Mr. Thorson a little desperately at last, as she did not seem in-

clined to enlighten him. "Are you Miss Romaine, or Miss Lysle, or Miss Thornton?"

"I am Hilda Romaine," said Hilda, and feeling the crowd loosen, set her shoulder to an opening and sidled through, while he followed as quickly as his bigger bulk would allow.

"I want you to come into a tea-shop and have tea with me," he said at once, as they mechanically fell into step along the pavement. "I cannot talk to you so well in the street, and I am very anxious to ask you some questions. It struck me that you had such complete mastery of your instrument the other night, that your talents are a little obscured in a Ladies' Band. Isn't that so?"

"I am obliged to accept whatever position I can that will earn me my living, you see," said Hilda plainly. She was hesitating over the tea-shop, but only from habit. Here was a man nearly as old as her father, a gentleman, one whose influence in musical circles must be enormous, and who could help her if he would. She looked at the deeply-set dark eyes and spoke quietly.

"If you are really interested, I will tell you anything I can about the position and remuneration in a Ladies' Band. Of course, there are many grades, though I really believe that I have tried them all now. But I warn you that it will not be an exciting or exhilarating account."

"Rather depressing, I should think, by all I know and saw the other night," he amended, holding back the swing glass door of a tea-shop for her to pass in. "This will do, won't it? There is a nice red plush corner for you, and all sorts of stale cakes. If I had only foreseen that I should meet you, I would have arranged for something better." He screwed the eyeglass into his eye, and regarded the entertainment

offered with a silent distrust that said it was certainly not good enough for his guest.

Hilda laughed her little satirical laugh as she took up the fare-bill. Her eyes were lowered, but he saw the warmly-tinted Greek face, and the bright, well-groomed hair against the sordid red plush and gilding of the place. Behind Hilda a long mirror duplicated her, and offered another view of her bent head and sloping shoulders. Mr. Thorson was probably very short-sighted indeed, in spite of the eyeglass, to cause him to look at her so intently.

It was a somewhat expurgated account of herself that Hilda gave him, because a certain decent reserve in her demanded that she should omit other people's agency in her circumstances. Whether or no he could silently supply the missing links she did not ask herself; she only knew she was easing the bitter strain that had been running through her life for many years by this recounting of them to a sympathetic personality which simply existed for her in two misty dark eyes. She talked to the eyes, the rest of the man being but a blurred outline to her, too vague to frighten her into reserve. For the time, indeed, he seemed to her sexless, but with a healing power in his voice to make her feel less of an outlaw against mere existence. Other customers came and went in the shop, and the waitress grew tired of commenting on the couple who lingered, talking so earnestly, and almost forgot them. It was long past six when Hilda rose to go home, having written her address for him in his pocket-book, and with no thought save that he might perhaps help her through it. They shook hands at the shop door, and the man stood bareheaded with the glare of the electric light on his grey hair, while the girl sprang on to the step of a passing omnibus with the facility of a Londoner.

Nous Autres rather pride themselves, as a rule, on being able to jump on and off without stopping the vehicle. Flair, for instance, would run and jump like a monkey, until told by her Doctor that she positively must not, to her intense disgust. She had an unsound heart and weak muscles, but long training had taught her to calculate to a nicety how to dodge a passing cab, trot by the side of her omnibus, outpace the horses for an instant, and then spring for it. It saved time in the long run, and made her feel the equal of scornful man. Hilda's easy swing up on to the step of her conveyance, and the little backward curve of her body as she turned to smile at her late companion in the doorway, made her appear suddenly younger than while she talked of bitter things with a shadowed face. Her qualities of health and strength as well as beauty were startlingly apparent. Mr. Thorson looked as if some one had reminded him quite as suddenly that he was an elderly man, as he stood for an instant swinging the eyeglass on its black ribbon. . . .

They met in a desultory fashion two or three times after that, and talked over what might be done to improve her position, before he began to write to her. It was then that she began to know and love the real man, for letters are the most dangerous attraction that can be offered a woman. The mere fact of his setting down his thoughts for her in black and white has a certain confidence and sacredness in it; and then a woman is nearly always an idealist, and would prefer to eliminate the flesh. There is no shock of physical awakening in a letter, and no sweet dread of touch. Even a lover's letters are suggestive of a man's mind rather than his body, and Thorson did not write as a lover. He was a charming correspondent, and far more accomplished in

letter-writing than Hilda—for alas! he had the drawback of his age to experience him! But he seemed quite satisfied with her replies, and no cloud darkened the serenity of their companionship for the first three months of the acquaintance. Then, on a day in spring, came a bolt from the blue, in the shape of a kindly, courteous letter suggesting that he should call and see her in her home circle, and be made known to her father. Whether the expurgations in her accounts of herself had really deceived him, she could not tell, but it was the natural outcome of their growing intimacy that as a gentleman he should legitimize his pretensions to her friendship before her own people, instead of leaving it on the more unconventional footing on which it had hitherto stood. Hilda recognized the inevitable in Thorson's letter, and acknowledged that had he done otherwise he would have been a different man to the friend of whom she was growing really fond; but she knew also, as he could not, the household to which he asked so simply to be introduced.

Mr. Romaine had a small house in the neighbourhood of Westbourne Park, where he lived a shabby life on a pension derived from having been in the Civil Service. He had retired early, under a scare of heart disease, and had become the shambling figure of Hilda's knowledge of him, browbeaten by his wife, and slowly sinking lower and lower in the social scale. At one time, soon after his second marriage, they had launched into manifold expenses and hampered themselves with debts against which they still struggled; and as Hilda always saw the family in her mind's eye, it was a harassed, under-servanted life, with the long-legged stepsisters growing more and more common in manners and appearance, and taking the tone of the cheap schools to which they went in the neighbourhood. The mere look of the

house was so impressed upon her, that to her dying day she shuddered at its facsimiles in suburban districts—and they are many in London. It was a semi-detached villa, whose stucco front looked all the dirtier for the fact that its neighbour was rather rich in paint and hearthstone. Perhaps the tenant was more successful in bullying his landlord, for though Mr. Romaine also held his house on a repairing lease he never seemed able to get anything done. There was a narrow flight of steps leading to the narrow front door, and before the house a neglected square of garden, which to Hilda suggested dilapidation and poverty far more than if it had not been so pretentious and had looked sheer upon the street.

The internal economy of the place matched the outside. For many years now they had had a succession of general servants, who were first overworked and then dismissed in a passion by their mistress, who being of much the same class as themselves, had all the arrogance of the beggar on horseback when set in authority over them. During the periods between the departure of one servant and the installation of another, Hilda did most of the housework, with set lips and the danger signal of her warm red blood rising to her face. Mrs. Romaine undertook the cooking, which she did to an accompaniment of loud grumbling, usually spoiling the food and proclaiming herself as too exhausted to attempt such labour again. So the family lived on cold scraps and bread and cheese until the advent of a new domestic, to go through the same dreary curriculum of quarrels and dismissal, etc. But always, whether they had a servant or no, Hilda laid the meals and made the beds and risked spoiling her hands with washing up. It sounds, perhaps, a small price to pay for food and shelter; but after ten

years of such service, with endless bickerings, the most patient Griselda is liable to her moments of desperation, and the feelings that to clean her own boots and brush her own gowns is the one burden too much laid on her by Fate.

And it was to this household that Mr. Julian Thorson proposed being introduced, through his very usage to the customs of the finer social world!

Hilda thought of the great composer's grey head and the delightful charm of his manner in the hideous rooms where her stepmother's taste raged triumphantly in furniture and colouring; she thought of her father's nervous, shrinking efforts to talk, which had replaced his former natural ease, and of her stepsisters giggling and whispering in corners—above all of her stepmother's strident tones, and the chance of her being in an ill-temper, in which case she would certainly be rude "just to show Hilda that it's no good being stuck up. I'm not going to cotton to her friends that she picks up in the street!" (Mrs. Romaine having made her husband's acquaintance on an omnibus, had always been uneasily conscious of its irregularity, until she hit upon the plan of carrying the war into the enemy's country, and by constant assertion had really come to believe herself that Hilda's friends were never made but in the same way.)

Neverthless, the girl knew that he must come, and with her lips set in an ugly line she sat down and answered his letter, thanking him for the suggestion, and naming Sunday as the only day on which they were all sure to be at home. Perhaps she hoped in her heart that her stepmother might go to church, and leave her father and herself to talk to the guest, who—thank heaven! —was at least not young enough to interest or attract Mrs. Romaine. The latter lady went to

church for various reasons, as when she had a new gown to display to the shopkeepers in the neighbourhood who knew her, or when the girls had nice clothes, or when she was so hipped with staying at home that any change was better than none. She never, however, went without some such motive power to impel her there.

Fate did not favour Hilda, or, if it did, it was by back-handed methods. Mr. Julian Thorson called on a day when every drawback was painfully in evidence, and when Hilda's surroundings were certainly at their worst. At least they formed a background to a very beautiful picture, for the girl sat with her hands resting one in the other on her knee, her face colourless and fine with suffering, and something rather grand in her quiescence throughout most of his visit. She introduced him to her father, stepmother, and stepsisters, with a kind of grim amusement that had passed beyond humiliation, and Mr. Thorson had the full shock of his host's obvious uneasiness, as of a servant in the presence of his employer—of Mrs. Romaine's coarse, flushed assurance—and of Daisy's and Violet's startling resemblance to a young lady in a tobacconist's shop from whom he had chanced to buy some lucifer matches on his way. There were oleographs on the walls, and jingling bead curtains wherever they could be hung, and many photos of Mrs. Romaine's relations smirking at him out of gilt frames . . . and in the midst of it all sat Hilda, with her tortured Greek face, and the warm natural colours of her face and eyes a triumphant contrast to Mrs. Romaine's examples of artistic furnishing! Mr. Thorson looked at her desperate young beauty once, and drew a breath like a deep sigh. . . .

He had arrived at the house about four o'clock. After twenty minutes of discomfort,

Mrs. Romaine turned to Hilda and suggested her getting tea in the tone of a bullying master to a dog. He guessed that she was showing off on his account, and winced for the first time, for Hilda could not assert herself now, and must accept the bragging order. She rose with perfect self-possession in her leisurely manner and left the room, Mrs. Romaine adding in an off-hand tone, "The girl's out, and we keep only one servant, Mr. Thorson. I suppose you think that a great hardship, but Mr. Romaine says he can't afford more, so, as I tell him, his daughter will have to play the slavey when the real one has a holiday. Hilda lays aside her fine airs when she's at home, I assure you! She has to if she wants her bed made and her boots blacked!"

She laughed loudly with a sense of triumph in destroying an impression of living at her ease which she did not doubt that Hilda had tried to give. Why should she think otherwise, when she would most certainly have done so herself? Nor was there anything in the attentive face that Mr. Thorson turned on her to tell her what he thought of the revelation, unless the little trick he had of swinging an eyeglass on a black ribbon which he wore, could be said to betray irritation. Mrs. Romaine put it down to affectation, however, and made a mock of what she called "mollyculls" for days afterwards. Only as Hilda entered the room again with the tea-tray in her hands, he quietly swept some cheaply bound books from a small table and made room for her to set it down. She smiled a little as she thanked him—the only time, he thought, throughout his whole visit.

During the thirty-five minutes he spent in the vulgar little "drawing-room" he learned many things—amongst others, that Mrs. Romaine did not believe in people giving themselves airs when half the world had never heard of them!—by

which she obviously meant that her knowledge of music did not include his work, being as a fact strictly limited to Dan Godfrey and Harry Hunter; and also that his acquaintance with Hilda was not favoured by the household because they had not known him first, nor was he a young man of the very lower middle-class behind a counter in the immediate neighbourhood. His grey hair, and obvious middle-age, indeed, made him somewhat of an anomaly to Mrs. Romaine, who felt herself baulked of a good joke at least at Hilda's expense, to be increased by Daisy's and Violet's facetious allusions to her "young man." It was a little impossible to regard Mr. Thorson as a suitor, when he obviously made no pretensions to that position at all, and only referred to Hilda personally once when, speaking directly to her father, he said that he considered Miss Romaine's talent worth something more than her present position, and hoped to help her to improve it; that he had not done so already was due to the fact that the man he most wished to see on the subject was in Germany, and he would not ask her to give up her band unless he could actually offer her a better engagement, with a prospect of its continuation. All this might be strictly satisfactory, but it was galling to a jealous, spiteful woman, who would rather have been able to pick holes in her step-daughter than have to acknowledge her possible good fortune. Mrs. Romaine was no adept at keeping her annoyance to herself, and so by the time that Mr. Thorson left she would barely shake with him, and was talking loudly and rather facetiously with her own daughters, her manner changing to off-hand curtness as he made his adieux. It would hardly have improved her temper had she known that he did not notice her ill-breeding because Hilda's hand as it lay in his for a moment had been stone cold, and her face was

beginning to look drawn under the strain she was enduring.

"You poor child!—you poor, beautiful thing, dropped like a rose in the gutter!" he said to himself as he walked fast away from the dreadful house. "All day and every day—and nothing but that to come home to after hard work!" He thought of his own ample means, of his luxurious house where every fastidious whim was studied, and in his kindly humble heart he felt ashamed. "God preaches us roundabout sermons," he said with a sigh, slackening his pace after a while, and trying to calm his unusual excitement. "That child's face was one. I wonder why He grinds the youth and beauty so out of His own creations? Such a life! Dear Heaven! a boy would have become vicious and gone to the deuce to console himself. The girl is enduring as women do, and only growing dull and heart-sick and embittered!" . . .

Perhaps it seemed worse than it was even, to his sensitive, over-refined nature, for he loved beauty passionately, and there was no beauty in Hilda's life unless she made it for herself by her violin. Anyhow, he did not repeat the experiment of going to see her, but he asked her instead if he might introduce her to a lady, an old friend of his, and took her to a flat in Albert Gate, where this good angel lived. She proved to be an elderly woman—a widow, but with forty years of married sweetness in her tired old face, and manners as ingratiating as Mr. Thorson's. Hilda wondered a little why she looked at her so long and almost wistfully when they were introduced to each other, but she forgot to wonder in the pleasure given her by her hostess and the atmosphere which surrounded her. Everything in this environment appealed to Hilda's taste—the refinement, the hint at luxury

perhaps, which, after all, was only expressed by the girl's pitiful little desire to "have things nice," and the society of a woman not only well educated (it would have been difficult to rival the soundness of Beatrice's actual education, or Magda's quick intelligence), but used to the daintiness of social life as well. Her name was Mrs. Mornington, and she seemed attracted by Hilda, whom she invited to come and see her whenever she liked. What Mr. Thorson had told her of her history, or how he had described her home circle from what he had seen of it, Hilda hardly dared to think, but once Mrs. Mornington said, "My dear, you are very, very pretty! It must be all the harder for you to face the world in earning your own living." And Hilda answered, "Yes, Mrs. Mornington, it is hard": and that was all, except that when they parted on that occasion the older woman put her hands on the girl's shoulders and kissed her.

"Very, very pretty!" she murmured to herself after Hilda had gone. "And quite a young woman" . . . and then she took off her spectacles and wiped them, for they were dim.

It is perhaps significant that Hilda never told Nous Autres of the extent of her intimacy with Mr. Thorson or Mrs. Mornington. They heard, in the first instance, of her meeting with him, and hoped that it might be of value to her from a purely material point of view. It was always useful, in their experience, to know influential people. But Hilda must have contrived perhaps unintentionally to mislead them into an impersonal view of Julian Thorson, nor did they know of her constant visits to the flat in the Albert Hall Mansions, where Mrs. Mornington lived. From that bridge in her life, represented by her father's second marriage, the girl had gained a complete control of herself, with an unspeakable bitterness

whose only betrayal was the shadowed Greek face; but with the control a little of the iron had inevitably entered into her soul, until she was as reserved, though in a stronger way, as Beatrice. Life was always teaching Hilda, and she learned hardly. Even the education of association with Mrs. Mornington and her flat was not all pleasure—it had its sore side in the feeling of being at a disadvantage which beset her in the contrast between herself and other women whom she encountered there at times. Hilda made most of her own clothes with the same skilful fingers that managed her violin; but the most conscientious amateur's work is heartrending in comparison to the paid professional's. She knew the value of her face and figure, but even in the evening—when toilet deficiencies seemed to her less noticeable in herself—she did not feel the clothed equal of the guests who listened to her violin-playing with cordial pleasure, and rendered her the delicate homage of thanking her like a friend. What her audience saw for themselves on these occasions was a tall woman in a soft black gown, whose cut passed comment while it lent itself as an inoffensive frame for an attitude and face that made more than one sigh for faint envy. With her body swayed a little backwards, as her firm, strong hand swept the bow to and fro—to and fro—Hilda was a thing of curves and colouring, of splendid pure lines and the vital beauty of flesh and blood. Mrs. Mornington's room was a long one, overlooking the Park, which lay like a map many stories below, and it was upholstered in a dull crimson that had the warmth of roses, and seemed to keep some Eastern scent faintly hanging in the draperies. Against this kindly setting Hilda's bright hair and blue eyes and flushed face were always set like a mosaic in Thorson's memory.

They had known each other for six months of an intimate friendship before he fulfilled his promise of offering her a better position than the one she held in the Ladies' Catgut Band. It was so natural to trust him, however, that the delay had hardly occurred to her as a fret at all. She knew that the great music publisher to whom he meant to speak about her was in Berlin. In the meantime, she learned to play Julian Thorson's music to his own accompaniments, and to be happy without the cynical thread that had made even her laughter of a rather keen quality. Happiness had a developing effect upon Hilda, whereas the hard miseries of her life had threatened to condense her nature to a mere resisting force. There was something new in her face that made her beauty really noble—a hint of the maternal, a brooding glow that seemed to guard a secret too feminine for definition. It was with her on the day of Beatrice's breaking-up party, and was the key to the feeling the younger girl tried to express when she said that she did not care to look at any one else when Hilda was in the room. Something most tender was acting like a revelation in Hilda Romaine; she could afford to be gentle and not to armour herself against the buffets which she had learned to expect from humanity. A subtle sympathy had made her understand Beatrice in her pain, and had left her with a quickened comprehension and anxiety when they parted that haunted her all the next day like a premonition.

It chanced that she was going to the Albert Hall flat by Mrs. Mornington's invitation that evening, in spite of the increasing difficulties placed in her way at home; for Mrs. Romaine belonged to a class whose sense of authority consists in opposition. She did not really care whether Hilda had her own friends to visit or

stayed at home, so long as her own diversions were not hindered. And Hilda became more scrupulous in discharging her barren duties in the household the less love went with them, arranging matters carefully and with rigid justice so that she should be spared without inconvenience. Mrs. Romaine had nothing to complain of, therefore she grumbled in the hope of at least fretting her stepdaughter's temper to the destroying of any pleasure she might have had in going out, for she regarded Hilda's anger as her one vulnerable point, and since she knew in her undeveloped brain that she could not influence her in one least degree, she retaliated on the girl's impassivity by the petty revenges of studied ill-nature. It was one of Hilda's worst afflictions that she had not even her bedroom to herself. More often than not it was shared by one of her stepsisters, whose upbringing and inherited instincts made personal niceties a minor consideration. So long as Daisy's frocks were sufficiently new and smart, she was not particular as to what lay underneath. Hilda's influence and example might have overweighted her stepmother's in this particular, if Mrs. Romaine had not regarded it as a point to be contested for the sake of victory; as it was, the torture of such close association was one which only a gentlewoman could appreciate, herded with a like companion. Hilda changed her gown to go to the mansions in a room made more intolerable by contrast to Mrs. Mornington's surroundings because Daisy's personal belongings were littered about it, and by her mother's advice she had closed the windows to keep out the dust of the street. To do the child justice, she remembered the state in which she had left the room, and when her stepsister came in tired after an afternoon performance of the Ladies' Band, she apologized hurriedly and

offered to run up and "clear away some of my things." But Mrs. Romaine heard her, and promptly found a reason for her staying downstairs, through an almost mechanical habit of ill-nature.

Hilda came down again, ready to go out, with her lips set in the old line that meant unbroken silence, and left the house pelted by Mrs. Romaine's comments and taunts, which seemed to affect her as little as if she were one of her marble likenesses in the British Museum. But there was a red colour in her face that was not reflected by the sunset, and she swung along the road to the nearest station and booked herself for Kensington High Street with the same strained compression of her lips. This was the day, remember, of Beatrice's Resignation, and was intensely hot even for July. Hilda got into a third-class carriage and threw her head up as if gasping for air, for the mental and physical sense of thunder in her atmosphere were almost more than she could bear.

At Queen's Road a gentleman came along the platform, evidently in search of a first-class carriage. He was a well-dressed man with a face that Hilda did not observe, for she was thinking of very different things; but her own seat was next the window, and her unconscious head turned towards the platform. The gentleman paused with his hand upon the door of the first-class carriage adjoining, looked at her, came back, and deliberately entered the third-class.

If she had been alive to her surroundings, Hilda would have been on her guard at once, but she did not even notice that any one had sat down opposite to her. There was another woman at the further end of the carriage on the same side as herself; otherwise she and her *vis-à-vis* were alone. He sat well round in his corner, his legs

elaborately crossed, his eyes fixed on the girl opposite with a glare like a beast of prey's. When the train had started he began to shift his position, bringing his knees slowly round until they touched hers. . . . With a sudden sensation of physical sickness Hilda became aware of his proximity—aware, also, that he belonged to a species of human animal that she had learned to know only too well, alas! and whose advances were always begun in this way in a public conveyance. Nous Autres early learn that this, their adversary the bestial-man, walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. They warn each other after some unusually revolting episode, but they can afford to laugh scornfully at the insult cautiously offered to them.

Hilda sat back and drew her knees away. She did not look at the man, in the hope that her action was sufficient rebuff. He moved his feet and touched her again, pressing her until she drew her knees back against the door of the carriage. Then he jammed his own against them, his eyes never moving from their scorching stare. Hilda waited, drawing her breath. All the anger that her stepmother had roused and she had held in check, flared up now at his augmentation of her passion, as a spark applied to a train of gunpowder. The blood surged over her beautiful face, making it the mask of an angry goddess, and her eyes were two gems of living sapphire as she turned them on him at last, and leaning forward, spoke so distinctly that the other woman heard and turned her head, gaping with surprise.

"Will you be good enough to move your knees from against mine?"

It is not often that Lothario hears his methods clearly stated in words, for he counts on the fact that womanly decency shrinks from acknowledging any knowledge of them. The gentleman

stared still for a moment, as if petrified; then he stammered something, raised his hat, and as the train drew into the next station he stumbled out on to the platform almost before it was safe. Hilda leaned back in her seat serenely; only the stormy rise and fall of her breast betrayed the boundless rage which was out of her control for the minute. She was so passionately angry that it shook her even as the incident itself had not done, and her heart was still beating unevenly when, after taking off her hat under the auspices of Mrs. Mornington's maid, she was shown into the long familiar room in the mansions, with its red draperies and faint smell of Eastern spices.

Mrs. Mornington was not present, and the servant asked Hilda to excuse her for a few minutes —she was writing letters. Rather glad to have time to compose herself, Hilda replied that Mrs. Mornington was not to hurry on her account, and took up an illustrated paper to distract herself rather than with any idea of amusement. The quiet, luxurious peace of the room, and its subtle scent, acted like balm on her wounded mind, and she drew a long sigh of pleasure and relaxation, as one who rests after long pain.

After a few minutes she dropped the paper and moved leisurely to the looking-glass. Mrs. Mornington had not appeared yet, and she stood still before the glass, studying herself, and mechanically touching her gown into still more conventional order. No woman could have been quite without satisfaction in the reflection that a mirror gave to Hilda, however lamentable the garments she might be wearing; but Hilda was really not thinking of the mere colouring of her splendid young flesh and blood, or appraising the old black gown that at least had the merit of being soft and not obtruding its material upon her already complete beauty. To dress Hilda in

a "costume" that drew attention from herself to itself, would have been as bad as to bundle up the Venus of Milo in a kimono. The girl's eyes were turned inward, however, trying to see herself as the gentleman of the train had seen her, and her fine brown evebrows came together with the ugly effort. To this man—who might be typical of a score of others—she had been but a pretty face and finely developed figure travelling third-class; for which reason she was certainly approachable, and possibly obtainable—whence followed the natural advances of the male animal to the female. It was all so sordid and repulsive, even to remember, that her face became set like an avenging Juno, and she felt herself somehow defiled by the possibility of such things shaping themselves in men's brains—brought there, perhaps, by her own innocent existence!

She was still standing facing her reflection—a girl with the mask of outraged deity, who was putting herself conventionally to rights before a French mirror—when the door opened and Mr. Thorson came into the room. She turned at once to shake hands with him, but her smile was a little less candid, and a little more suspicious than usual, for the stain of Nous Autres was upon her, and she had been reminded back into her watch upon mankind. It was not a generous mood in which to greet anybody—not a fair one in which to judge a friend.

"Mrs. Mornington has asked me to come and talk to you while she finishes her letters," he said, as simply as usual. She noticed that he was in evening dress, and wondered a little. He did not always dress when he dropped in to see his old friend in the evenings, a velvet coat being allowable unless there were other guests. It had made these less important evenings more sociable, and Hilda had liked it. Now, however, there

seemed a certain convention added by his very correctness of costume. He looked almost handsome—certainly picturesque; and with a sudden revulsion of feeling she recognized him as a masculine personality, desirable to women for something else than his genius. Even the eyeglass on its black ribbon was more noticeable against his white shirt-front, and seemed characteristic of a leisure class set apart from the workers to whom she belonged.

"I am glad to be able to have a little talk with you," he went on, not with any more stiffness, but in a subtly confidential tone that made what he had to say more serious. "I want to talk to you about your future."

"Yes?" said Hilda.

"The man I told you about—my publisher—is back, and I saw him yesterday. He thought—we both thought—that it was no use to ask you to give up the certainty of what you are doing unless we could offer you an equal certainty, but with better prospects."

"No." Hilda spoke as earnestly as he had, and her manner was the honest one of a person who sees a necessity and bows to it. "I cannot take anything uncertain, however advantageous it might look in the future. I feel bound to help my father as long as I live at home, and I should like to be able to help him even if I lived away." For a moment she paused, looking at that possible life—a life free from the hideousness of her present one, which she could yet feel to be her right—and her eyes deepened in colour as they always did with pleasure, fancied or real. She was standing with her hands resting on the mantelshelf, her figure bending a little without stooping, her head drooped in the old, graceful way from the neck. Thorson had seen her in innumerable attitudes, but he never remembered her ungrace-

ful, nor did he ever feel tired of that inevitable poise of the head.

"And so," he went on, as if taking up her words, while he still stood and looked at her, "we talked you over, and came to the conclusion that you ought to get plenty of concert engagements after a while, with his and my influence to back you; but concert work being even at its best uncertain, we thought that at the same time you should try teaching, for which it seems to me that you are far more fitted than most, because you are very painstaking and absolutely thorough."

She flushed a little, whether at the praise or for some other cause could not be guessed. Hilda flushed when she was resentful as much as when she was touched.

"I should have tried pupils, but I could not get any," she said with a touch of the old mockery at herself.

"I do not mean private teaching. Our view was that you should pass certain examinations and hold certificates from some Conservatoire (I assure you you would not find it the impossible thing you imagine!) and then become a supplementary teacher there. Of course, in all these places there are certain men who have made their names, and who command their fixed amount of guineas for a lesson, according to scale; but to my mind some of the best work—all the grounding which I think so important—is often done by those whose names merely appear on the prospectus and are hardly noticed except by those who know. There are some schools of music where both my man and I have influence, and where the teachers do not all have to hold certificates for playing scales at Vienna. At least, I would guarantee that it should be a post on which you could depend for a living without

killing yourself with work, and whereby you could help your people without living at home. What do you say?"

"I should be only too thankful!" said Hilda a little breathlessly.

"Very well. Now the only thing is that at present we have not exactly the post we want, falling due, but we think we shall have in a short time. In the meanwhile"—he looked a little curiously at her, she thought, as if he considered her afresh almost from a stranger's point of view—"I have another alternative to suggest to you."

She did not foresee what was coming, and yet by some sub-conscious intuition she moved away from him, her face losing its glow of grateful colour, and her blue eyes seeing not him, but the man in the train. . . .

"It is not the sort of alternative one offers to a woman without some hesitation," he went on in a tone that had suddenly become hurried and lowered. "A man of my age must be very much tempted before he would make such a proposal—tempted beyond his power to resist, and past his own judgment too, perhaps. Hilda, can't you see what I am offering you? I pose oddly as a lover, dear little girl. I suppose you have grown so used to think of me as the composer, the person with influence to help you, that as a man you have not thought of me at all! It seems nearly as odd to me as to you—to ask you, who are not much more than half my age, if that, to let me love you and protect you. It is not a very tempting offer, is it? A grey head, and a bachelor flat!"

All this time she had not spoken, but she had gradually turned to face him, the horror of the whole thing forcing itself upon her shuddering, reluctant mind. It required a real effort to prevent herself from putting her hands up to her

ears to shut out the sound of his familiar, musical voice, which had only spoken honestly and kindly to her until now, when he used it to degrade her ideal of him. In one vivid flash of intuition it seemed to her that the whole world was corrupted for her—turned from a friendly humanity into universal devilish enmity. Her suspicions rained in on her mind like frozen hail—why had Mrs. Mornington stayed out of the room and left her to this? Why, if she were not in the plot? Why was there no one else to be present to-night? Had they all stood aloof—those pleasant smiling men and women who had spoken to her softly and seemed to wish her well, while—no doubt! —they had every one foreseen this end, perhaps thought that it had come already?—No doubt! No doubt!—she was one of Nous Autres, an outsider debarred from men's honesty, or woman's equality.

"The red tide rose to the arm-pits,
And the struggle to live was death!"

With the red tide risen in her heart, Hilda faced him, her hand against every man's from henceforth—every man's hand against hers. She was frantic with her delayed passion—the passion roused by her stepmother and the man in the train—and with the disappointment of the moment. With newly crimsoned cheeks and eyes made beautiful by her scorn, she turned upon him like a warrior woman, her words fighting for her sex, her voice pitched two notes lower than usual in her excitement.

"How dare you!" she said savagely. "How dare you even offer me such a position as that you hint to me—you are ashamed to speak out with good cause. What have I ever done that you should think me worthy of an insult you would not dare to offer to a woman of your own

standing? What, in your experience of me, has justified you in rating me so low? I thank you for your offer—it has degraded you as it could not do me. You can take your answer from that. I am of the stuff of which men's wives are made, Mr. Thorson—not their mistresses!"

For a minute he remained looking at her blankly, as if the storm of her words bewildered him into not understanding them. Then suddenly he made a deliberate step towards her instead of drawing back as she expected, and took and held her in his arms with a strength and tenacity that even her fury could not resist.

"Hilda," said the kindly voice she knew, with patient tenderness, "my poor child how you must have suffered not to know even when a man is honest! My dear, my dear! Do you think I could love you and wish to make you anything less than my wife? . . . It was my fault for putting it so stupidly!" The voice went on whispering, soothing her quivering nerves as skilfully as a great physician might a patient. "See how a man blunders over his first proposal! I'm too old, too. . . . *Am* I too old, Hilda?"

She did not answer in words, but she shook the tears out of her blue eyes, and left them more than ever like wet violets to look up at him. There was no apology for her: her life had been excuse enough in its exposure to men's licence. Let him be ashamed of his sex, if he would, before he cried shame on the woman! He stood holding her, more tenderly than with passion, as if she were something that had been very badly hurt, and which, maybe, only the angels could really heal. And below the concern of his grave man's face her brown head lay on his breast in an abandonment of grief and rest that told of a reaction more utter than he could realize, while her hands clung to his shoulders in the attitude

of one drowning, who holds to a last hope of succour.

. . . . . .

The room smelt more of Eastern spices than ever to-night, and of fresh English roses. Perhaps Mrs. Mornington—who lingered still over her letters—had placed the great bowls of flowers purposely about the place, to make it always sweet to the memory of those two friends of hers whom she had been wisely watching and helping for months. Hilda sat down on the broad Persian divan where all the cushions were collected, and Thorson sat beside her with her hands in his, and looked in her face as if he found an inspiration there such as set his own music singing. It was so quiet that Hilda heard the rustle of her gown as she turned a little towards him, and there was a silence upon them as if their happiness were so new and delicate that they might almost scare it away with words.

"And when will you marry me, dear?" he said under his breath at last, and the mixture of anxiety and reverence in the tone made her a queen bestowing favours. "There is nothing to wait for, is there? And I am not so young I can afford to squander my time with you."

"You are trying to frighten me with a bogey of old age!" she half whispered back. "I know of nothing to wait for—except the wedding cake!" The irresistible laughter came back to her eyes, and the shadow of bitter experience seemed lifted from her face, at least for the moment.

"A month—yes, surely a month is long enough for all the necessary paraphernalia! Will you come to Italy with me, my beauty?"

"I have never been abroad," said Hilda slowly. Visions of Venice—of far-off snows—of all the wonder of the world—came to her, and she had

a breathless sense of what all this meant. Yet even in that moment, following hard upon the delirious prospect of sharing in the joys of this earth which had seemed set far beyond her horizon, there came the half-whimsical relief that petty worries would be amongst the things that were past; and her actual thought was, "I shall not have to clean my own shoes, or lay my meals when I am tired, any more." The education of her life had taught her the drawbacks of such small pin-pricks, but it had taught her also the value of the best things he had lain at her feet, and she turned to him with a gracious, instinctive movement, and laid her cool bare arm across his shoulders.

"I am by nature a hard woman, I think, Julian," she said simply. "And perhaps if I had been happier, I should have been so wrapped up in myself that I should have grown selfish. You see I have almost perfect health, and when one's body does not prick one with reminders of the fact that there is pain to bear in the world, one's brain is apt to forget it. I have gone through a great deal of life-education—more than I shall ever tell you, I hope. But it has at last made me realize the full value of what you have offered me. Please love me, the rest may go past. We have proved that much, even with regard to each other, Nous Autres!"

For the minute the pressure of his arms round her was his only assurance, but as he looked into the blue eyes that were almost stern with remembered knowledge, he said, "I want to know your friends, dear. You will let me, won't you? Alma, and Magda (whose sketches I know already under her initials), and Franc, and the others of whom you have told me."

"I will introduce you to them with pleasure. But you must not expect them to accept you as

one of themselves," she said rather slowly, as if she had some difficulty in explaining her meaning "You must remember that their very lack of success makes them fence themselves round with a barrier. You will find that they receive you with what seems to you perfect frankness, and in that very frankness lies their reserve. I belong to a class that is no class, whom we call Nous Autres because there is no accepted position or status for them yet. And they are the most difficult of all people to help."

"Because they need help most?"

"Because—how can I put it?—they are outlawed by their own independence, or perhaps because they are merely a passing phase, making the way for a younger generation who will have the fair dealing and the acknowledgment for which Nous Autres have fought. I sometimes think that no one can help Nous Autres except Nous Autres."

"It makes one feel very impotent for oneself, Hilda!"

"I am afraid you are—and yet I don't know. I will do my best, and perhaps Alma and Franc will be honest with you." Her thoughts went back rapidly to the discussion of the night before the "going out of one's sphere" which they had nearly all condemned. "Magda Burke will like to know you, I think; but Flair—the writer whom the Press calls Flair Chaldecott—will drop me when I marry you," said Hilda with conviction. "Not for any personal reason, but because she drifts with her circumstances. The one of them all whom I think you *could* help, is Beatrice."

"Is that the girl whose voice you said might be cultivated?"

"Yes. She is in uncongenial surroundings, doing work that is too hard for her. And—I don't know—I think there is a private trouble

that might be more bearable if there were something better in her life."

"We will certainly help Beatrice," said Julian Thorson cordially. But they neither of them knew that by that hour Beatrice had already helped herself.

In her new-found happiness Hilda glowed and was glad. She was always grateful to her Providence that her romance came graciously with nothing sordid to spoil it, but only the memory of rose-red rooms and a great tenderness. Had Thorson been a younger man even, she felt that it would have been less perfect; for the very strength and vitality of youth makes cruder demands, and the years behind her had taken something from her of the capacity to meet young love on equal ground: She had above all things a sense of rest in the marriage offered her, and dimly realized that, with all her unusual health and splendid physique, she had grown tired. They were friends and companions before they became lovers. She looked into the quiet promise of his eyes and accepted protection with a relief that was like grateful prayer.

"What is she thinking of?" said Thorson at last, as her eyes came back from their long gaze past the red glow of the room into other scenes where he could not follow even in memory.

"I was thinking of how glad I am that I was strong enough to wait," she said. "Some of us grew too tired, and some of us despaired." (She thought of Winnie's laughter that had seemed tragic later on.) And some of us waited in vain, perhaps. But I have been so fortunate! I feel almost superstitious about it, and afraid to say it is real, lest I should wake up and find it is a dream. For, after all, I am one of Nous Autres—and this belongs to the Real Girls!"

"When a man falls in love, it is always with

the Real Girl," he answered. "It makes her a Real Girl—to him at least. Don't you see?"

"I fear!" said Hilda, with her quick, low laugh, extricating herself from his arms to meet the leisurely rustle of an approaching gown. "Hush!—here is Mrs. Mornington at last! We must behave ourselves."

But she knew, even as she went forward to meet her hostess's warm, silent kiss of congratulation, that by that very acknowledgment she passed into her kingdom and was no more of Nous Autres. . .

CHAPTER XIII

"Friends . . . old friends . . .
And what if it ends?
Shall we dare to shirk
What we live to learn?
It has done its work,
It has served its turn;
And, forgive or forget,
Or hanker and fret,
We can be no more
As we were before.
If it ends, it ends
With friends."—W. E. HENLEY.

"WE dwindle in numbers!" said Flair.

"But the tide is surely turning!" said Franc cheerfully.

"For some of us," added Magda quietly.

Her friend Deb had come down to fill Beatrice's place, and B.A. was there to take Alma's. But Winnie was gone also, and Hilda had announced her engagement; and through their sincere congratulations fell the shadow of goodbye. There was not one of them that wished it otherwise; but there was not one who did not know that Hilda must take up her new life and

drift apart from them. They had lost their god of the sun—the Apollo Belvedere—and the grave beauty of the Greek face would look from another setting—a better one, they knew. They were not, on the whole, a lugubrious community, but when one is always disheartened and generally disappointed it comes hard to be cheerful, even over another's gain which means one's own loss. It is possible to be content with very little—Nous Autres are proving it every day; but the theory of divine patience supposes an inevitable crown as a reward. Show me the religion that says, "Be good for the love of good," and does not throw in Heaven as a bribe! Christ Himself—Buddha himself—may have said it; but perhaps because the priests have narrowed the wide ground-plan of religion to rules and dogmas, they have always been forced to hold out an ultimate gain to get their flock into the fold. Nous Autres do not as a rule believe in dogma; they are not, as has been seen, very religious (they generally do their needlework on Sunday—a shameful thing to all good Churchwomen, who would rather be slovenly and dirty than use a needle and thread on the Sabbath, because they had not time during the six days that God might have decreed them work!), and they do not think that by saying long prayers they will attain Heaven, their experience of earth rather leading them to doubt the existence of such a place. Nevertheless, they do believe in its essential essence, and they "go straight" for the blind faith that is in them, and that finds expression in some ideal such as Hilda found in her traditions, Franc in her mother, Alma because being of God she loved God (the real one, not the exclusive property of sects), Beatrice in her self-respect, Flair because, as she said, she "couldn't be a cad." There is no hope of reward in this

world or the next to urge them—sometimes they slip and fall, sometimes like Winnie they are driven mad and reckless, or like Beatrice they tender their Resignation; but in the main they fight a good fight, and when they finish their course they have kept the faith. When one of them touches the hope of happiness, as Hilda had done, they rejoice the more in that they have known none such themselves; but it is hard to lose a comrade, and their feeling found expression in Magda's voice as she answered Franc:

"The tide is turning . . . for some of us!"

"I had a letter from Alma to-day," said Flair, and perhaps she introduced the subject with intention. "She is really in luck at last. She was understudying a character part, and the woman who had it fell ill and Alma played it. The original actress has had to go home, and Alma is not only to play it through the tour, but is to be in their next London production."

Flair never embroidered news on fiction lines—she gave it succinctly, as a journalist, but it made its effect.

"Hurrah!" Franc exclaimed. "Dear old girl! I *am* glad. B.A., give me a glass of neat claret on the strength of that—we'll all drink her health—standing up! Get up, Hilda! Yours will come next."

"Here, don't dig me in the ribs, Franc, or send me on to the floor in your enthusiasm!" Hilda retorted, beginning to laugh, and nearly choking over her glass in consequence. "Propose the toast, somebody. I am going to start 'For she's a jolly good fellow!'"

"Here's Alma Creagh, and her continued success!" said Franc. Somehow it seemed Franc's lot in life to start the cheering for those who were luckier than herself, or, as she herself said, she was "born to play accompaniments."

Just as she had given the note for the National Anthem in the Extension, so now she began the "Hip! hip! hurrah!" with such good effect that R. L. looked as if he wanted to put his paws over his ears or stuff them with his tail.

"Hip! hip! hurrah!" rang the voices to the accompaniment of chinked glasses, and then "For she's a jolly good fellow!" sang Franc. (They could all sing except B.A., and she refilled the glasses.)

"For she's a jolly good fellow,
For she's a jolly good fellow,
And so say all of US."

"And now, ladies, another toast!" said Franc before they subsided. "I call upon you to drink the health of Hilda Romaine, one of ourselves—*Nous Autres!*—and to wish her health, wealth, and happiness! We think—don't we?—that she is fortunate in marrying a man like Julian Thorson, not only because he is a successful man, but because every one knows that he is a gentleman—and a good one! But we think also—don't we, girls?"—and Franc's voice rang—"that Julian Thorson is more to be congratulated on marrying our Hilda, and we speak from what we know and have proved of her. *Salut*, Nous Autres! Hip, hip!——"

The last echo of the final shout made several people in Duncannon Street pause, under the impression that a school-treat must be going on in the unlikely precincts of the little side turning; and they would have been quite incredulous had they been informed that the noise was due to six girls. Then Franc started the chorus again, and they sang it standing until they were hoarse, and dropped exhausted into their seats; whereupon Hilda patted Franc on the head by mean advantage of her inches, and R. L., still suspicious of

their sanity, jumped for Flair's knee and prodded her. Nobody but B.A. and Magda, as it chanced, were smoking to-night; the rest of the society had been forced to bring some work with them, as occasionally happened when the hours had been long in office or theatre, and the "woman's day", had got pushed on one side—for they keep the Sabbath to rest in when they can. Flair was trimming a hat, and doing it very badly. She usually left this sort of thing to Alma, who was a born milliner, but Alma being away Flair's appearance suffered. Hilda was mending gloves, and not remembering for a minute that she would not have to do it in the future. Deb was tatting embroidery to trim underlinen, and Franc was darning stockings with great industry.

"If I don't get a pair done to-night, I shall have to go to the office with a hole in my heel to-morrow!" she said with a chuckle. "Go on, Flair, tell us more of Alma's letter."

"She was rather funny about her landlady (you know what theatrical landladies are!). It appears that the company arrived at this last place at six in the morning, and Alma was so fagged when she had found her digs that she just lay down on the sofa while her breakfast was prepared and smoked a cigarette. She noticed that the landlady was casting suspicious glances at her, so at last she spoke. 'Well, Mrs. Jones?' she said. 'You look very surprised! Haven't you ever seen an actress smoke before? You have had plenty here!' 'No, miss,' said the landlady gloomily. 'No—they didn't *smoke*. But they did everything else!' she added. Alma said she never heard anything so suggestively inclusive."

Every one laughed, perhaps because they were determined to be in good spirits, perhaps because Flair told her tale with a certain dry humour. She was frowning and sighing over the tortured

hat on her knee the next moment, and ended by trying it on R. L., who twitched a vexed ear and turned round the other way.

"Hang the brute! (The hat—not R. L.!) It won't come right!" said Flair. "Besides, I can't see. Franc, just light the gas a minute, there's a good fellow!"

Franc did as she was requested, and saw something besides the mangled hat.

"Flair, you are looking very seedy," she said decidedly. "When are you going for a holiday?"

"Oh, next month—any time," said Flair absently, tying a nasty tight bow of ribbon and putting it at a most unbecoming angle. "When I've got this hat finished, perhaps! Besides, I've had my holiday really, for I went away with Alma in May. It's only the heat that makes me limp—ninety in the shade this week! The Underground has been like Hades."

"What a pity you have to go on it!" Franc looked a trifle anxiously at Flair. "Sometimes it seems to me wicked that women should be born delicate when they have to work. We ought all to have been made of cast iron!"

"Yes, but our parents very seldom realized the duty that they owed to the next generation!" said Deb shrewdly. "We are all pledged to the future, and ought to be taught to acknowledge the debt from the first. Every woman who marries should have to pass a medical examination, if I had my way, and if she put on false airs of shame more shame to her." Deb was almost as tall as Hilda, and made on a much larger scale. She impressed her hearers with a sense of one having authority, and she looked big enough to take all Nous Autres into her capacious heart. There was, indeed, something maternal about her that made Flair snuggle up to her at times, and

Magda rest her head against her knee when she came home tired. Flair depended on B.A. for strength when she needed support, Alma for sympathy, and Deb to mother her on the rarest occasions. She admired Magda, had sympathized with Beatrice, and loved Winnie, while Hilda and Franc stood to her for all the virtues. Her point of view is valuable as somewhat sampling that of the other girls.

"That is Ruskin's view," said Magda. "I always thought it very sane, and not at all impossible. And as to scaring anyone off marriage, it couldn't do that more than most women are scared by the little they know."

"That seems to me taking an exaggerated view of a small detail," said Flair, with brutal plainness. "The real gravity of marriage consists in the little things of everyday life, and whether one can be satisfied oneself and make one's companion satisfied, much more than in the bogey which women make out of certain functions of nature. They are a shock, I admit, when you first learn of them; but they are such a very, very small detail compared with ordering the dinner and knowing a little about the money article—just enough to listen intelligently."

Magda's mouth was mutinous, but she did not follow a dangerous subject. She had her own opinions, and Flair was shamelessly outspoken if pressed. Instead of risking anything more outrageous, she coolly seized on Flair's notebook—a dear possession, and never far from its owner—and turning the pages took her fountain-pen out of its leather case.

"What are you doing, or going to do?" demanded Flair, making a feeble grab at her property and failing signally in her effort to regain it.

"I am not going to read the 'poetry' with which I see that this is filled in horrible disjointed

lines," said Magda, as she laid her half-smoked cigarette on the ash-tray with thrifty care. "But the spirit moves me to draw Hilda at this particular crisis in her existence, and I have too much respect for my own gowns to carry a notebook wantonly. When I must have a bulging pocket, I must, but I don't live in expectation of being taken ill with an inspiration as you apparently do!"

"Well, I don't carry letters from the last man who has asked me to tea or luncheon, as you have to do daily, 'lest you forget,'" retorted Flair. "Half a dozen love letters must ruin the set of your gowns quite as much as my innocent notebook. However, I forgive you if you will make us a good likeness of Hilda. Get to work, April."

Hilda obligingly turned her face in the position that Magda wanted, and B.A. offered the artist a pencil. But Magda declined, and began to sketch with her fountain-pen on a sheet of Flair's scribbled book, where burdens for ballads were hopelessly mixed with faint imitations of Rossetti and Lindsay Gordon, and half a line would mean as much as a shorthand note to Flair, and get worked up some time into topical verses. Like all true artists, Magda thought in her own medium, and the most natural expression of her art, for her, was in line. She drew with a sure and certain touch for some silent minutes, and then handed the result to Flair. It was as successful a sketch as any she had ever made—pure and bold in outline, characteristic of Hilda; a simple expression of Magda's thought of her friend.

"Ah, how good!" Flair exclaimed in honest delight. "And you have kept the look of the Apollo Belvedere. Hilda, you must certainly have a son, and he must be just like the statue!"

"And do please arrange for him to be six feet

high!" put in Deb comically. "I see so many undersized things in the City that I begin to wonder if there are any men left in existence!"

Magda looked at Hilda with raised brows as her sketch was passed round and admired. "I hope you are taking all this in, Apollo," she said drily. "We are giving you due notice of our wishes beforehand, you see. Indeed, our whole (very questionable!) conversation to-night is solely for your benefit, and inspired by your startling news, which has demoralized us!"

"Yes, Hilda, and for goodness' sake don't let any mistaken ideas of modesty stop you from knowing what to do for your children," said Franc earnestly. "Our mothers thought it 'womanly' to ignore the question, so that they ran risks of which we are the shining examples and results. We may be immodest and coarse in our generation, but at least let us have nothing to answer for in the way of feeble constitutions and the germs of disease." (She glanced instinctively at Flair's flaccid white face bent over the hat.) Of all Nous Autres you are the most fit to be a mother. Pay the debt owed to us to the next generation, and if it should happen (which God forbid!) that a daughter of yours should be one of Nous Autres, let her come to the struggle at least well equipped with a sound body and a healthy mind."

"Hear, hear!" said Magda. "You are not offended, are you, Hilda?"

"Not at all—though I think you need not be so previous with my nursery," said Hilda, with a little irrepressible laugh. "I know what you mean, Franc, and I have more theories, if anything, than you have. Marriage is, after all, a woman's most natural and greatest work—not the accomplishing of the mere marriage ceremony, but all that comes afterwards in daily life.

It means the giving of one's whole energies to it to make a success."

"I am with you there," said Flair, without raising her eyes from her work. "If I married I should give up trying to write. I don't believe in serving two masters."

"I wish you *were* happily married, Flair, though it would mean good-bye to literature for you. They say no really happy woman writes a book—or for that matter does anything else to absorb and distract her mind!—but it would, I am sure, be an immense gain in some ways to you. It is a more correct lens through which to focus things in the world generally, than the one by which you see!"

Flair laughed shortly. "You wish I were married!" she said slowly. "*I!* How about health and heredity, Hilda, and the next generation? No; we suffer for the faults of some one behind us, but at least we need not let our children have to say the same thing! There is only one honest course for the victims of heredity to take, and that is not to aid in the wrong from which they have themselves suffered. We condemn our parents; then let us be consistent, and not repeat the mistakes we have discovered. There is not much that we can do in this world perhaps, but at least we can abstain from doing."

Hilda was rather blankly silent. Her troubled eyes rested on Flair's rumpled head and the curious blue shade round her mouth and eyes, and she was too honest to say that she thought Flair had anything desirable to bequeath to another generation. Even her brains were a thought morbid and ill-balanced—the natural outcome of an ailing body perhaps. She was no darling of Nature, but she was the implacable example of many an outraged law, and served the living sermon preached without intention by

poor humanity. The result of Hilda's scrutiny was that she spoke rather irrelevantly, and certainly abruptly.

"Flair, I wish you would go and see your Doctor. You can't afford to play tricks."

"All right," said Flair, with an easy little laugh. "I knew that was coming. The poor man will tell me to avoid stairs, and to do my writing lying down on my back. He always does."

"Is there anything really the matter with you, Flair?" B.A. asked kindly. She was shrewdly accustomed to calculate the strain of minds upon bodies, and to judge just how much the mechanism would stand, and did not overgear her pupils any more than she did her bicycle.

"Nothing new," said Flair composedly. "I have a weak constitution, and, in consequence, a weak circulation and a weakened heart. It would be affectation to say I was sound anywhere, but I have no cause for alarm. I don't suffer any pain unless I do silly things, and then I have a sharp attack that teaches me wisdom."

"Attack of what?" said Magda resentfully. She had the energy to combat definite ills, and she hated an unseen adversary.

"I am sure I don't know," said Flair, yawning. "It's about as sharp as cramp, and it comes on pretty quick. If it went on long I expect you'd die of sheer pain—but it never does go on. Talk of something else, please."

"The future of the Nation seems laid on its women, first and last," remarked Franc, scrambling out of her chair. "'Who goes home?' Don't get up, Flair—R. L. looks so comfortable."

"You can let yourselves out to-night," said Flair. "I am posing as an invalid on Hilda's suggestion!"

"We do not want any more gaps in the circle!"

said Hilda quietly. It was the only direct reference made to Beatrice that night. Nous Autres are not given to wailing, and they had said directly to each other as they chanced to meet, all that was to be said.

"The tide is turning!" said Franc hopefully. "We have done with all the saddest parts, Hilda, and now we shall begin to look forward. You are our beacon star! Your wedding is to be our new starting-point."

Hilda smiled her grave smile. There was little alteration as yet in the noble beauty of her face, unless it were for a softer colour in her eyes, and a gentler setting of her lips—but she would always be rather grave than gay.

"I want to bring Mr. Thorson to introduce to you all," she said. "Or if you like it better, you can come and meet him somewhere. But you must all know him."

"'All that were left of them—
Left of six hundred!'

hummed B.A.

"Don't croak!" said Franc, pounding her on the back with an excellent intention of improving her spirits. "I want Alma here to back me up, and uphold my theory that the tide is turning."

"You have said that before," said Magda teasingly. "Repetition of a phrase is one of the first things to eliminate in composition. And if you insist on being so optimistic, I shall back Flair's pessimism—'We dwindle in numbers!'"

CHAPTER XIV

"Take no thought for us: the blood of the forerunners like the seed which the wise husbandman scatters on fertile ground."

MRS HUMPHRY WARD.

"So the Gods lost Flair."

The Driving of Flair.

"THERE! take that to your chemist and have it made up—and keep it about you. Don't leave it at home when you are going out reporting, mind!"

Flair's Doctor smiled as he got out of his chair to open the door for her, but there was something behind the smile—an anxiety, a rapid calculation in his long-experienced mind. Should he tell her more? Should he warn her as seriously as he could? He had seen enough of Flair to know that if he paralysed her nerve he should do exactly the thing he was trying to prevent—hasten her to a crisis that might lie many years ahead. He reached the door first, and stood with his hand on it, looking at her.

"I suppose there is nothing more to be done?" said Flair carelessly.

"Except to take ordinary care. Don't overtire, and don't rush up and downstairs. What are you smiling at?"

"Well, you see, it doesn't lie in my hands exactly. If I have to be on a report for six hours, say, and a meal snatched anyhow—well, I've got to do it! I'm sorry to have given you all this trouble over me, but I promised a friend of mine that I would ask you. And to tell the truth, I thought you might give me something

to stop the pain. I hate and fear pain!" said Flair candidly.

"That prescription that I have given you will stop the pain—that is why I don't want you to be without it," said the Doctor. "Take it at once when you feel the attack coming on, and don't take a six hours' report if you can possibly avoid it." He met the gentle irony in Flair's eyes, and his earnestness deepened. "Miss Chaldecott, you absolutely *must* be careful. If you don't, you may—have a serious illness."

"Well, that would be the end of me, I expect!" said Flair lightly. "And I don't expect my Order of Release for many years yet. If you could give it to me I should call you an angel of mercy—but I suppose there is no such luck. Good-bye, Doctor, and thank you!"

She went out of the consulting-room and through the wide hall and into the street, hardly thinking of what he had told her, because she was absorbed by the fact that he had risen to open the door for her. As Flair had said, her belief in the existence of gentlemen depended at this point in her life upon her Publisher and her Doctor, and when she felt incredulous she sometimes made errands to go and see them and reassure herself. She was ruthless of their valuable time, but it was quite as much for a mental tonic as for a physical that she called upon her Doctor, who charged her nothing, by the way, and—opened the door for her. Flair had come straight down for her latest interview with him from Fleet Street, where she had been to see the editor of an old and esteemed weekly. This person sat with his hat on behind his table when she was shown in by the clerk. He did not get up, and he left Flair to stand until she put her hand, with the finest suggestion, on the back of a chair. Then he said, "Oh yes, will you sit down?"

and when the business was concluded (he had himself requested her to call upon him), he nodded her a dismissal and sat still while she let herself out of his office. After all she had no just cause for complaint; he was perfectly civil over the business, and she was only "F. C." the journalist. Flair went on to her Doctor, and regained her respect for mankind. The little attention from the opposite sex was really as nothing to her, but she revelled in a purely æsthetic sense of the man's own courtesy. Flair always waited with pleasurable anticipation for the close of an interview with him because she knew that he would shake hands with her and show her out himself.

She received the same sort of benefits from her Publisher, neither man being in the least aware that it could have been otherwise.

Flair had her prescription made up on the way home, and then went round by way of Covent Garden in order to buy fish for R. L., so that she reached her rooms rather late. Whether she were tired or no she never forgot the cat, or if she did, would tramp out again to get his supper and cook it herself on the inevitable "Beatrice" stove beloved of Nous Autres, before she ate her own meal. In R. L.'s interest Flair had learned many surprising things about the commissariat of her neighbourhood,—where, for instance, they gave the really good scraps of meat for twopence, and which fishmonger would sell a cod's head with plenty on it. R. L. had perhaps grown fastidious, but only a stray will eat stale fish, and the fishmongers had begun to know Flair and to give her wholesome odds and ends. She had no objection to carrying a weighty newspaper parcel down Bedford Street, and as she generally wore a sailor hat and a mackintosh on her shopping expeditions, it is probable that the shopkeepers

thought that she was shopping for herself. It is certain that they were often good-natured, as they crammed an extra ounce or so into Flair's parcel, and yet they never treated her as one of the harassed women or thin children who swarmed round the doors on Saturday nights, waiting for "free" scraps. Flair had an invaluable manner that was misleading. It was gentle to silkiness, and when Nous Autres wanted an implacable hall-porter softened, or a harsh doorkeeper appeased, they always sent Flair to interview him. There was a certain innocent friendliness about her which, taken in conjunction with her published books, was apt to startle people who had not experienced the grim realism lurking behind it. "Miss Chaldecott has such a soft, sweet manner! You would never think she *could* write those stories!" said one bewildered editress who had expected a horny female with spectacles and a loud voice and did not happen to meet Flair's betraying eyes. The "soft, sweet manner" had wooed countless fresh haddocks and slices of hake out of the fishmongers accustomed to give only trimmings for cat fish, and R. L. flourished, though what he chiefly loved was to share a small rabbit with Flair, or a sixpenny pigeon during the shooting season at Hurlingham. For if you go down to Fulham when the pigeon-shooting is on, you may sometimes buy pigeons for sixpence, and while Winnie lived at West Kensington, Flair used thriftily to arrange her periodical visits there so that she gleaned a supper on the homeward route.

"Perhaps I am seen at my best," she remarked pensively to Alma on one occasion, "cutting up a rabbit's head. I assure you that in R. L.'s service I have learned by now exactly how every bone fits in, and where each scrap of meat is to

be found. I believe I could *make* a rabbit almost as well as the Almighty. And I can tell you just how much brain a cod-fish has, and how to get at the flesh on his cheeks. Cod fish must be plump old people among their own kind! "

It is almost impossible to write of Flair without a supplementary history of R. L., because the big black-tabby filled all the margin of her life that was left by work, and was the only masculine personality really influencing her. If her Doctor had known the real spur to make her as cautious as he wished, he would have hinted that if she were laid up R. L. would be neglected. But he had not had the privilege of meeting R. L. Stevenson in fur and whiskers, and so he missed a fine chance of persuasion.

The prescription he had given Flair arrived in due course, and she remembered to carry it about with her for three days. On the third she had a threatening of her trouble—the old pain gripping at her heart and making her bend nearly double with the first effort to endure it. But she remembered the mixture and swallowed it, afterwards throwing herself flat on her bed, by which means the difficulty of breathing generally righted itself. The spasm passed off, and Flair congratulated herself on the Doctor's remedy. As she had said, she was afraid of pain, and would have taken anything to avoid it.

July had drifted into August, and still the heat continued. Flair meant to go away, but she was anxious to finish a heavy "pot-boiler" before she left London, after which she could take a holiday with a clear conscience. She had no attack for a week after taking the Doctor's remedy, and it being some ten days since she had seen him, her impression of the necessity for care was wearing off. She had not really been frightened, but the insistence in his mind had

communicated itself to her, and she had mechanically done as he told her. Then, on this breathless August evening, she came in tired, took off her hat, and sat down to her supper in company with R. L. Even the cat did not seem inclined to eat, and after he had satisfied himself he went out of the open window for a stroll among the chimney-pots. Flair left the sash flung up that he might come in when he pleased, and taking up her MS. and fountain-pen she went downstairs to write in the room with the packing-cases, which being larger than her own and not under the roof, was considerably cooler. The story was finished, and she was correcting the type; she hauled out a big dictionary, for her spelling was shaky, and took that too. When she reached the committee-room where Nous Autres usually met, she remembered that she had left her Doctor's prescription lying on her dressing-table when she took off her outdoor things, but it was up six flights of stairs, and on the whole she thought it was worse for her heart to climb all up them again after her supper than to neglect his caution and not carry the remedy.

Flair sat down to her corrections on a camp stool which she had brought with her, as well as the dictionary, using the packing-case as a table. Outside the wide-flung, darkening window the faint sickly smell of the streets came up strongly, heralding rain. It came after some minutes—a few "blood-like drops" as large as half-crowns, that pattered on the window-sill, then the quicker rush of a thunder shower, and presently the steady gentle hiss of summer rain, washing the stale streets and mercifully flushing the gutters. Flair looked up for a minute and thought of R. L. But the window of her room upstairs was open, and he would run for shelter as soon as he liked, so she had no need to disturb

herself. R. L. had severely practical habits; he disliked a wet coat, and the only result likely to accrue from his outing were muddy paw marks on Flair's table and her bed.

The rain did not seem to decrease the heat, but added a stormy savour to the atmosphere. It was an evil night, as black as mid-winter and as hot as the Tropics, pulsed through by the heavy whisper of the rain. The depression in the air lay like a leaden weight upon Flair's head, but she had been working for an hour, and was growing stiff and tired when she heard the front door bell ring and Mrs. Bonnet's slow step going down the passage. A minute later Franc burst into the room waving a paper, and glistening with the wet of the outside world.

"Flair, have you seen it? Did you know? I thought I must come round to congratulate you," she said breathlessly.

"Seen what? Know who?" said Flair, ungrammatical in her bewilderment. "I say, Franc, you are soaking!" She remembered with vague discomfort another night that had resembled this—a night when she had been working late and had looked up to find another girl in the room, with dripping clothes and a desperate fair face to frighten the angels. . . .

"Never mind. It's a notice of X——'s on your story-book! My dear, I *am* so glad. His criticism always means success, however late it comes. Didn't I say the tide was turning?"

Flair took the paper in silence, and read the notice. Her last book of stories had been out some six months, but a great man had only just discovered it, and given her a review which, as experience told her, would probably rouse the public in her favour. Her breath came a little uncertainly as she read, and her heart beat. . . . Visions of less drudgery and monotony, of life

being a little easier perhaps, dawned dimly on her horizon. She asked no more—she had grown beyond the mere desire of enjoyment that drives young blood, and for some years now had done her work well simply for the love of it, and no hope of pleasure or reward. The intense anxiety about bread and butter, and the savage clutch at opportunity, which had at last landed Magda and Flair on the even lines of knowing that they would not starve as long as they went on working, had at the same time dulled the eager perception of life in them. The review that Flair held in her hands was slightly stilted, a little patronizing, but for all that it meant acknowledgment, and what she first recognized was that she might perhaps have to write less "pot-boiling fiction" in the year, if there were any profits from the book itself. For the acceptance, and even the fairly good circulation of a book, does not necessarily mean any great pecuniary advantage to the author. Flair calculated to lose on her books, because they took her longer to write by far than a "Novelette" of the same length in paper covers. She lived by rough fiction (technically called "slop") and free-lance journalism, and wrote books with an anxious effort, nor until now had she even the hope that they would repay her in the present. A book was indeed a speculation that might prove a good advertisement in keeping her name before the eyes of the public; X——'s review might make it really profitable—that was all.

"I stayed up in town to-night for a choir practice," explained Franc rapidly. "And one of the girls at the Extension had seen this and told me, knowing that I knew you, and I bought it. Hadn't you seen it, dearie?"

"No," said Flair almost vaguely. "It's a good notice; I hope it will help me on, Franc."

"I'm so glad I was the first to tell you! We must all drink your health at the next meeting, as well as Alma's and Hilda's. I can't stay a minute, Flair. I only rushed round to bring this."

"Thanks—yes, thanks awfully," said Flair, but still in that vague fashion. Perhaps Franc saw that she wanted to be alone, and had said she could not stay with a tact that was one reason why her friends loved her. She kissed Flair warmly, told her not to come to the door, it was such a wretched night, and vanished as suddenly as she had come, leaving an impression of her personality like an unexpected glimpse of the sun at midnight.

Flair stood still by the packing-case after she was alone, and re-read her notice. She sucked it in to her innermost comprehension, not only for its praise, but for its blame; for she was, I believe, rather unusual in that she depended very much on her reviewers for her own improvement. The manner in which Flair studied the lordly remarks of some young man from Oxford (probably her junior in years, and certainly innocent of the long experience and hard work which had trained her to write books) was rather touching. When one of these youthful cockerels crowed out against the length of her stories she condensed them religiously; when they told her that she was wanting in incident, she denied herself the analysis which was her *forte*, and crammed in action: whereupon some one else on the same paper reproved her next effort severely for differing from her first! That was the only thing that shook Flair's faith in the critics—the comparison between one reviewer and another in the same journal. For though she knew, as a journalist, how rapidly columns become "open," and one man is replaced by another, she could not rid

herself of the habit of thinking of a big Daily as a voice, and regarding it, even in its book reviews, as a consistent critic rather than a series of individual opinions. The only thing on which all reviewers did seem to agree in Flair's case was her "style," and as she had not the least idea what they meant, this bewildered her more than all their contradictions. Flair had no conscious aim at literary refinements. She knew that she loved Stevenson and Ruskin, and all true poets, and read them from sheer delight in their facility of phrase as well as for that they told her. Pater worried her with his commas until she lost the sense amongst them; and she read most classics for what they said rather than the way they said it. The reason of her acquirement of that mysterious "style," if she really had it, must have been by gift of a sensitive ear that could hear the form of a phrase even as she wrote it. Flair had only to read through her own pages to be conscious of the jarring word and the badly hung sentence.

After a while she put down the paper with the review, and thought she would write to Alma and tell her—Flair had always told Alma the things that concerned herself rather than the rest of Nous Autres. Perhaps she would cut out the review and enclose it—if she could part with it. She wanted to gloat a little more, to feel herself suddenly and strangely known to one of those far-off beings who spoke to her so constantly and plainly in print (for X—— was a well-known man of letters), and who had become aware of her existence—just as if, while looking at the picture of some great and honoured stranger, it should prove alive and nod familiarly from the canvas, claiming an acquaintance. Flair felt herself at the same time one with her world as she had never been before, and yet set apart from it.

The murmur of the loveless London beyond her narrow life came up on the hot August air, and floated in drowsily through the window, softened by the distance of the little side street leading to her door. The sense of the hard fight, by which she earned even a right to exist, seemed to press and press her back upon herself. It was a leaden weight, this vast crowd of men and women who were just beginning to listen to her here and there perhaps; but for so long they had treated her as a stranger and an enemy, that she could not get in touch with them. The vast indifference of the great city in which she lived was terrifying. It had cowed her, though she had not known it. For years she had not let herself think of the enormous silence that engulfed such lives as hers, or the impotence of her mere existence. When we come to consider it, almost all of us, were we driven to bay, would fall back upon the thought of another's personality—some human being in our private world whose mere presence would at least prevent our going mad with loneliness. It is the sudden removal or death of such factors in our lives that makes us cry out for the relief of hearing our own voices. Flair felt her solitude suddenly, and heard the outer world rushing past her, buying and selling, marrying and being born—heedless of her, and very far away. She turned almost eagerly to Alma's letter, with a desire to forge a link between herself and humanity again even by a cursory little action.

As she wrote the date on the paper a sudden sense of weariness fell on her, as if the accumulated tire of the whole day attacked her, and made even writing a letter irksome. She was conscious of her own depression and of feeling ill, and with a gleam of ugly humour she expressed it to Alma after her own method, know-

ing that she would be understood. Instead of putting the number of the street, she wrote "Hell"—and added, "Please note change of address!"

> "DEAR ALMA,
>
> "Franc has just rushed in on me, and almost tumbled over herself in the effort to tell me that X—— has written me a notice of the 'Story-book' in his paper. It is a d——d good notice."

Flair paused suddenly, a change coming over her tired face. The pen went on more slowly, wrote a few stiff words, and then stopped.

"I was very excited for half an hour, and now the reaction has made me feel awfully ill——"

She rose abruptly, gasping over the truth of that assertion. The pain was coming on again, and she remembered that the remedy the Doctor had given her lay on her table at the top of the house, up six flights of stairs!

She stood hesitating a minute while the horror grew on her. She was all alone in the room—practically alone in the house, for Mrs. Bonnet was in her own domains, and shut off from the room with the packing-cases. This might be a slight attack like the last, but she knew that she had had a long day to handicap her, the weather was stifling and the final excitement of the notice had done its work. If she could get upstairs, she might prevent the pain getting to its worst pitch, for it was really the pain that Flair feared rather than any danger. She made a few steps towards the door, but her own nerve failed her, or the movement made her worse. With desperate trembling hands she flung the dictionary on the floor and, lying down on her back, supported her head on it, to bear the growing agony with closed

eyes. For a few minutes she lay quiet, trying not to think of herself, and listening to the insistent sound of the rain falling and falling through the black night. In her mind she saw endless processions of men and women forced to tramp through it on errands like her own had often been, their stern efforts at bread-getting rendered harder by the little physical discomforts of walking where others rode, of going out in any weather where others could stay at home. Loveless London—a dreary waste, where stealthy hands laid snares for the women who walk with clean feet through the streets of experience! Winnie's face looked at her suddenly out of the phantom crowd—a white patch upon the wet night. . . . Then it seemed to her as if the pain gripped her like a physical hand round her heart, until the " cramp " of which she had spoken made the perspiration hang in beads under her curly hair. Her eyes were still closed, but beneath the brown lashes were blue hollows of grief, and the same violet shadow hovered round her mouth. During the paroxysms she could think of nothing but the breathless horror, but as it faded away and left her for the moment half conscious and almost nerveless, it flitted across her mind for the first time that this might mean death. If no one came to help her and the attack wore out her strength, another such spasm would surely end it. Must she die like a dog, on the floor? She turned her heavy head ever so little and gazed round the half-lit room. There was no succour there, and she flung up her arms feebly, as if appealing to a higher mercy, in the attitude of one crucified.

Flair had had no fear of death for years. She had spoken truly when she said that it was her Order of Release, and she should look on her doctor as an angel of mercy if he told her she

must die there and then. It was not the thing in itself, but the method, that horrified her. Flair had always been self-indulgent, and had loved the fleshpots of Egypt. She had contemplated dying with stoical indifference, and would have met it so; but she had always fancied herself in bed, with Alma there certainly, to look at as a child will a well-loved face before falling asleep, and perhaps one or two more of Nous Autres to say "Good-bye." It would be just like falling asleep—she had always loved her bed and fancied herself lying with relaxed limbs until she fell into a beautiful unconscious slumber with no grey To-morrow to end it. That was the closing scene of her imagination—but not this fight between death and life, with agony that made her body moist and a sense of swooning rather than peace.

To die like a dog, on the floor! She tried to shift her head again, and looked round her with asking eyes that begged dumbly, for she could not speak. As the inevitable end became clearer to her brain, and seemed to draw nearer to her, she might have been resigned but for a last pang that belonged to Earth, and hurt her as only Earth's loves can do. It was not Alma over whom she grieved, or whom she feared to leave. Alma, after all, could speak, could appeal to humanity, had learned to battle with equal weapons in this hard world. But—R. L.! The old broken lines she had never finished came back to her mind to torture her—

"Of Kurdistan, and how he loved the beasts—
(God's helpless, whom He places on the earth
And says to man through those dumb mouths 'Be kind!')
They tell it in Farisha to this day—"

She saw him, even the next day, going hungry;

she saw him in fancy wandering about the rooms with his beautiful eyes full of wonder and trouble, neglected, possibly turned out if Mrs. Bonnet found him a nuisance, left to starve and steal and be ill-treated as man has always answered God's appeal "Be kind!"

"God's helpless!"—the passionate, pitiful care for dumb things that lay at the root of Flair's very nature, rose up and cried to a Providence whose place she had so often tried to take to them. Oh, surely one of Nous Autres, remembering that she had loved him, would make herself responsible for R. L.! They were all so hampered by their circumstances that she dared not think it out in detail. She saw him always, in fancy, hustled and frightened, and driven away while he still timidly searched for her and thought she had deserted him again.

"It took me two years to make him get over having been chivvied and ill-treated as a kitten," panted Flair, trying not to see it all in her fatal imagination. "Oh, if only I could make him understand that it wasn't because I wanted to—that I didn't give him up——"

The spasm in her brain was bringing back the spasm at her heart, and she held her breath. The pain was coming—coming—sweeping over her. She opened her eyes, fever-bright with it, and saw that an old horror had become incarnate. Inside the door, corporate, real to her dying eyes, stood the Shadow—no longer the Shadow, but a living presence. He came towards her where she lay, her hands flung upwards and nailed to an invisible cross of pain; the warmth and breath of his humanity was on her as he bent over her relentless face, and the eyes that looked on her fear had grown material. She was past speech now, but with a last effort

she opened her clenched hands as if to show them empty, and made a faint gesture of renunciation. . . .

And so she went out, into the darkness and the rain.

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